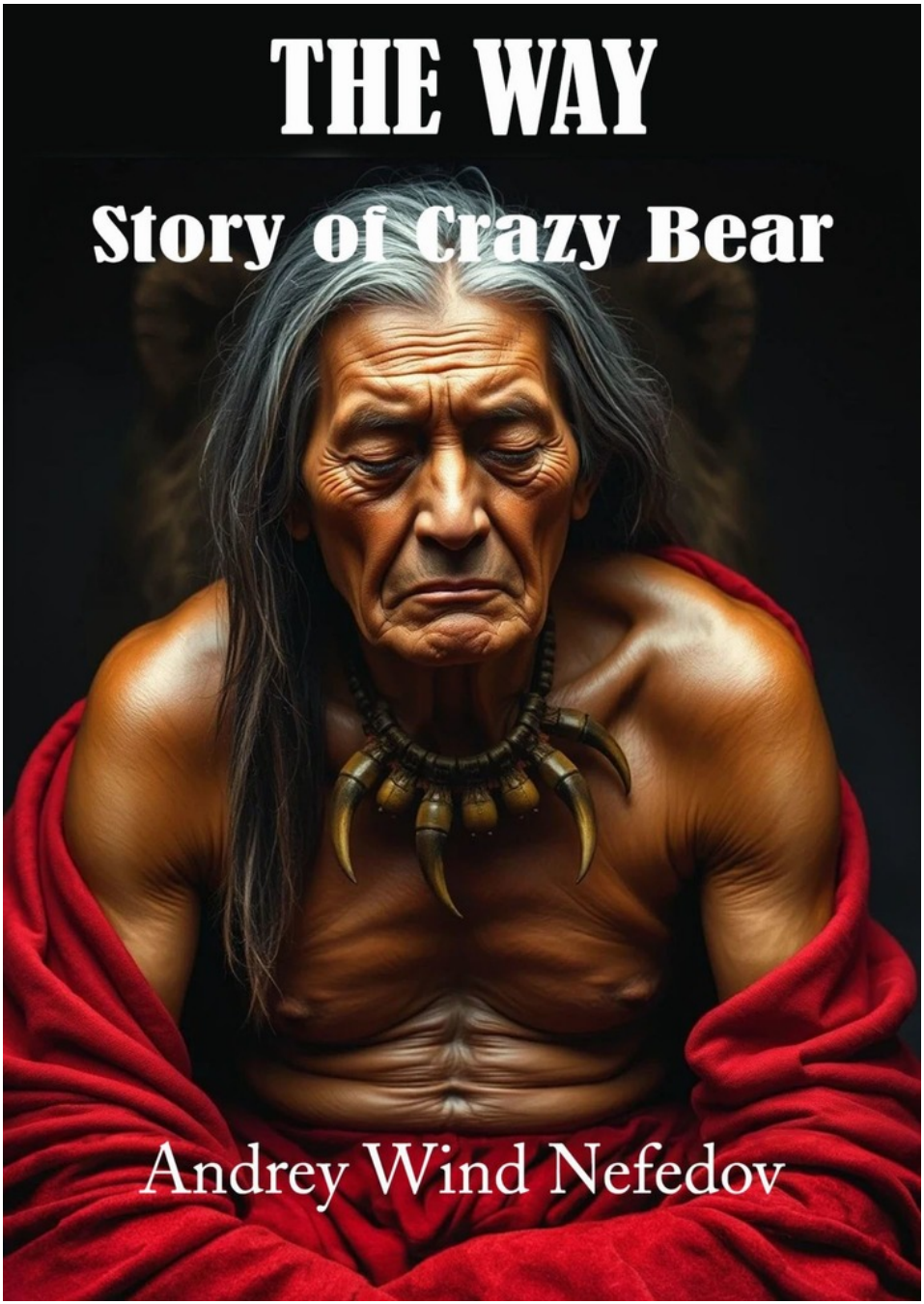
THE WAY
Story of Crazy Bear
Andrey Wind Nefedov

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Story of Crazy Bear

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THE WAY
(The Story of Crazy Bear)

To Julia, my wife

BY THE AUTHOR

In September 1917, the editorial office of the newspaper where I worked as a staff reporter assigned me to find some «juicier» material. The head of the department, whom everyone called The Rat — a gaunt middle-aged man with a gray, sagging face and thick lenses on his nose — impressively said:

— I don't care what you dig up, pal, but it has to be appetizing. Just remember, I won't accept any anti-war materials from you.

He uttered the last words almost in a whisper. Everyone in the editorial office was afraid of denunciations. Due to America's entry into the war against Germany, the government had whipped up a real hysteria: all Americans of German origin were being persecuted, and any anti-war sentiments were brutally suppressed.

— Go to Pine Ridge, — The Rat suggested to me, blowing his nose loudly into a dirty handkerchief.

— To the Indian reservation? What the hell would I do there?

— I heard a redskin who volunteered for the front has just returned there. A shell blew his leg off. We really need that kind of story. If you can spin this topic, it would be very useful for the newspaper…

I had never received a more uninteresting assignment. To go into the midst of native shacks and rummage around looking for so-called national heroes — what could be worse and more hopeless!

But I had to go, otherwise I risked losing my job. My only consolation was the brand-new car provided by the editorial office — a bright blue Ford Model T, shining as if it had just been doused with water.

I had no idea that this trip would turn my whole life upside down and that I would be fortunate enough to meet a man who would make me see the world in a new way. I was going to carry out a boring errand, but I encountered a Great Mystery, embodied for me by a frail old man…

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

My old friend Winthrop Haley, with whom I had studied together ten years earlier but had gone our separate ways, worked as a clerk in the Pine

Ridge reservation. I contacted him by telegraph, and he met me at the post station.

— What a magnificent thing! — Haley exclaimed, stroking the steeply curved fenders of my automobile. — No one here has ever seen such a wonder.

Hills covered in dense blue-green forests humped around us.

— Now this is a wonder! This is enchanting! — burst out of me. — This is true beauty and grandeur!

Winthrop just laughed in response:

— If only you knew what it was like here before. A real primitive world. And as for the times before we were here, it doesn't even bear talking about.

— «We» who? Who are you talking about?

At that moment, a bear emerged from the thickets with a terrible roar. Startled, I hit the brake. The car made a sound like a tubercular cough, jerked, and stopped. The bear rose on its hind legs, opened its huge maw — whose smell I acutely sensed from several meters away — and crashed its full mass onto the front of the car. We were shaken thoroughly.

— God! — Winthrop whispered hoarsely. — It's a female with her young!

I saw two shaggy cubs peeking out from behind the bushes.

— She'll tear us to pieces! — Haley gripped the seat with his hands. — Don't you have a rifle?

— I only have paper and ink!

— Then pray!

And then, a little further down the road, a man appeared. He was dressed in an old plaid shirt and sagging trousers. His gray hair was cut short, but from his facial features, I unmistakably identified him as a member of the Indian race. I would have guessed he was about eighty or ninety.

— Get away! — I shouted to him. — Run from here, quickly!

But the old man paid no attention to my pleas. He had no intention of running away. For a few seconds, he looked at us, slightly spreading his hands as if feeling for something in the air. Then he decisively stepped towards us and spoke a few words in a language I didn't understand.

The she-bear, who had almost reached the car door, slammed its paws against the side one last time. I heard the terrible screech of its long claws on the metal, a sound that gouged deep furrows of fear in my memory for

a long time. However, hearing the words spoken by the Indian, the fierce animal stopped and shook its huge head. The beast's loud breathing rippled the air hardly less powerfully than its recent terrible roar had. It seemed to me that the walls of the Model T shuddered from its breath.

The Indian approached unhurriedly, stretching his hands out before him.

— He's talking to her, — Winthrop whispered. — He's asking her to leave us alone.

— Asking? — I managed to squeeze out with difficulty.

— Asking…

The she-bear seemed to ponder, then stepped closer and for some time stared directly at me and Winthrop. Its hot breath touched my face. Then it reluctantly turned and led its shaggy offspring away, waddling and grumbling under its breath.

— God! — I couldn't stop the trembling in my hands.

— So much for your introduction to virgin nature, buddy, — Haley laughed weakly. — Welcome to Pine Ridge territory.

— But how did he manage it? — I pointed at the old Indian.

— A bear can always find a common language with a bear, — my friend said and waved a greeting to the native: — Hello, Mató!

— You know him?

— Of course. He's one of the oldest residents here. He knows so many stories about the tribe's life that you can lose track of time with him.

— What did you call him? Mató? What does that mean?

— Bear. Actually, his name is Mató Witkó, which means Crazy Bear. You'll be lucky if you can find a common language with him.

— A common language? Does he speak English?

— Quite passably, — Winthrop nodded.

The Indian walked around the car several times, studying it carefully, sometimes squatting and looking underneath the chassis.

— White people come up with many interesting things! — he laughed.

Then he shook Winthrop's hand, and after that, greeted me. He smelled of herbs. Looking at me, he smiled almost imperceptibly.

— Yes, yes, — his lips uttered, — that's how it is…

The entire time I was fiddling with the car, trying to start it by cranking the front-handle, the Indian silently watched me. I constantly felt the old man's unwavering gaze on me. Finally, the car started, and I took my place

behind the wheel.

— Mató, come with us, — Haley invited the Indian.

The old man climbed into the car and settled on the back seat.

— I was waiting for this meeting, — he began when we started moving.

— Waiting? — Winthrop asked.

— The Thunder Beings came to me in a dream, — the Indian nodded. — They said a white man would appear here to whom I must tell the story of my life. You are that man, — he poked me rudely in the back with his finger. — I have never told anyone about myself. But the Great Mystery, through its messengers, demanded that I tell everything without holding back. It is time for me to leave this world. Nothing is eternal on earth, not even the mountains…

We drove on in silence. As we entered the settlement, which consisted of simple wooden huts, Haley nodded towards the Indian sitting in the back:

— He's one of the strongest shamans here, buddy. If he says he has to tell you something, then so be it. You don't understand what this is about now, but you will later…

When Mato Witko began to speak, I completely forgot the purpose of my trip and gave myself entirely to the life story of Crazy Bear — the greatest man I ever met on my path. Behind his inconspicuous appearance lay a strength that the boldest minds dare not dream of. As soon as he started speaking, I understood that I would make him the main character of my book.

— I was waiting for you, — he said. — I will tell you about my path, my feelings, and the secret knowledge. You must tell people about them. Wakán Tánka sent you here; you must not refuse. Everything the Creator has intended must be brought to life. The Great Mystery rules the world. It is not for us to decide why certain tasks are entrusted to each of us. We are meant to fulfill our mission, even if we do not understand its meaning. That is the essence of the Great Mystery…

This is how this book was born.

Some chapters of the novel are stenographic records of Mato Witko's account. I decided to leave them in their original form, without making any edits, even when the old man sometimes jumped from one narrative to another. This, it seems to me, gave the book a very distinctive form. Mato spoke very sparingly about some things, but at times words poured out

of him in a stream, as if some force compelled him to utter them. When he was brief, I took the liberty of adding something to the logical sequence of events, as I was writing a novel, not just recording someone's memories.

I was also fortunate to receive heavily worn pages from the disintegrated notebook of a certain Randall Steven Scott. By fate's will, the pitiful remains of his diary were preserved among Mato Witko's numerous relics. The diary, although noticeably damaged and missing many pages, proved no less valuable to me than the memories of the gray-haired Indian elders. The existence of these yellowed papers allowed me to fully reconstruct the chronology of certain events.

And now, my reader, after this lengthy but necessary introduction, I invite you on a journey along The Trail, where many human destinies intertwined into a single knot, fell apart, and merged again, to prove to themselves and others that in the world there is only God and His unwavering laws.

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

There is nothing left now. The life of the Lakota was in the past. Now we sit motionless and wait for death. Do not think that death frightens me. Everything in this world dies. Even rocks crumble with time. Of all we see around us, only Mother Earth is eternal, and the Sky. But my heart is heavy with the thought that I did not die sooner, now that the life is gone. Understand me correctly. I am an old man. I have lost a great deal, even though my knowledge does not allow me to think this way. I know things that most people do not even suspect. But I grieve, and I can do nothing about it. I failed to make myself like Heȟáka Sápa (Black Elk). I was too attached to my people and our way of life.

Our world was renowned for its freedom. Freedom was valued above all else. But I did not understand this immediately. Today, our children have children of their own. The elders will tell them of the great days of the Lakota, when our people could travel and hunt wherever they wished, and there were no fences blocking the path. But those born today will never be able to understand this.

I remember a time when my people lived far from the white man; we did not encounter whites, although many spoke of them.

I know that life can be different from what it is now, but my grandchildren, who are no longer children, do not know this.

There were no sick people among us. We breathed clean air and ate fresh meat, killing game with our arrows. The whites did not force us into schools or make us pray to the one they called their God. The world around us, my friend, was to us what a wise book is to you. We read the leaves, the grass, the sand, the stones. The animals and birds shared with us the harshness and the tenderness of the Earth. All living things were our relatives. The white man did not think this way. He did not, and does not, understand how a tree or a river can be our kin. The entire world, except for himself, seemed to him to be populated by wild creatures: beasts and

Indians. He began to destroy our great family. The buffalo disappeared, the elk, the deer. Our forests became sparse. The Earth is the mother of all peoples, but the white intruder slit her belly and gnawed at her for some metals. The white man considers himself the master of the earth, not its son. But where will this master go when the earth dies from his abuse?

At first, we thought the whites were simply weak and foolish; they did not understand the language of the animals and paid no attention to the whisper of the wind. But it turned out they were insane. Too much anger ran in their blood, and it poisoned them. I am sorry that we allowed them to enter our land. But how could we have known they were not like us? How could we have guessed that the foreigners would invent their own laws instead of following the eternal order of the Creator, who is the father of all living beings?

A great sorrow has settled in my heart.

My friend, your tribe is great; I have seen your cities, your brothers are without number. Therefore, convey our words to them through your paper. We have told you much. A spoken word must not fall to the ground and turn to dust. It is born for a purpose, it flies up like a bird and soars above us forever, so that people may make use of it.

When we were no longer living in freedom, Short Bull brought the Lakota a message from a seer, who foretold that the past times would return, the land would be cleansed of the white man, herds of horses and buffalo would reappear, our fallen warriors would return… Many believed and began the Ghost Dance, as the seer had taught. They did not understand that he did not mean the return of the bygone years exactly as the Indians remembered them, but was foretelling the coming of harmony.

That seer instructed the Indians of different tribes to love one another. He said they must forever forget the warpath, and only then would the beautiful life begin. He taught the people a new way to dance — all together, not separating men from women, or children from adults. He taught the people the dance of peace, the dance of unity. But the Indians failed to grasp his words and interpreted them in their own way.

I understood the seer and his teaching well, for I had heard of such things in my youth from Black Elk. I know that his prophecy will be fulfilled…

Black Spotted Elk (Big Foot) and many others fell to soldiers' bullets, but can that stop a prophecy? I do not know how soon it will come to pass,

but it will happen. The world of the white people is full of sickness, so it must die. But it will not be overthrown by war. The Indian people spent long years on the warpath; it was war that destroyed our life. We strayed from the laws of the Giver of Life, spilled too much of others' blood, and now we are paying the price...

BEAR

He turned thirteen that year, but he had not yet taken part in any war party (he hadn't even been asked to guard the horses during an ambush), and he had never shot a large animal on a hunt. Everyone called him Boy-With-A-Ringing-Voice, but he dreamed of a solemn and powerful name, the kind men received after a brave deed on the battlefield… He knew that seasoned warriors often took a teenager as a junior companion to teach them the arts of war and hunting. He, however, had no such mentor.

He sat on a large boulder, its base covered in soft moss and still holding the warmth of the departed sun, and stared with a fixed gaze at the quiet settlement of the Grouse clan — his home camp was quickly dissolving into the twilight. The boy had gone far enough from the Indian village to hear no voices, and now he was surrounded by almost complete silence. He wanted to be alone…

A black figure appeared before him suddenly, as if from nowhere, and from the surprise, the Boy's heart tightened, and his throat went dry. Everything around immediately became peculiarly dark. Perhaps it seemed that way because of the surge of fear; after all, the man had crept up unnoticed, meaning he was a cunning and deadly enemy… And there was nothing to oppose him with, as the Boy had brought neither a knife nor a bow and arrows.

— Do not be afraid, — a low voice spoke, and the Boy saw white teeth right near his face. In the darkness, only the whites of his eyes and teeth were visible (likely, his entire skin was thickly covered in black paint). Occasionally, an invisible ray of light snatched from the space two mighty curved horns above the stranger's head. The same glint allowed the Boy's sharp eyes to discern in a split second the shaggy pelt tied to the head, to which these horns were attached.

— Do not be afraid, — the black man repeated, — I will not harm you. I see you are deeply saddened. I know your thoughts. You feel that the elder warriors unjustly overlook you… I will help…

— Who are you? — asked the Boy, trying to suppress his agitation, — and

what help can you give me?

— I cannot tell you my true name. For you, I will be Bear Bull. I am the patron of those who are meant to awaken but do not yet know it. One day, great power will awaken in you, but many years will pass until then, and I will be your guide on the Path.

— Bear Bull? — exclaimed the Boy, unable to hide the surge of superstitious fear. — I do not know you.

— Calm yourself… In time, you will learn much. But I did not come for talk… Take the knife, — the Boy saw the wide blade offered to him gleam dully in the gloom, — and prepare to move from empty dreams to action immediately. Be very attentive and repeat my movements…

His words broke off.

The Boy flinched, hearing a terrible, trumpeting roar almost right in his ear. He turned sharply and saw huge tusks right in front of him. The beast breathed hotly into his face and swiftly rose on its hind legs, powerfully swaying its shaggy belly and instantly becoming impossibly huge. Something burst in the Boy's chest and sprayed icy needles throughout his body. Time stopped. The Boy forgot about the knife clenched in his hand, and what could he have done even if he had remembered the wide blade? Not a single one of the most experienced hunters would dare face a black bear alone. And here was just a boy…

— Cast aside fear! — came the voice of Bear Bull. — If you are fated to die, then it is too late to be afraid. Give your hands all the strength of your body and strike! Repeat my movements! Be my shadow now!

At that second, it seemed to the Boy that his vision sharpened abruptly: the outlines of the surrounding objects became clearly distinguishable, even though the night continued to thicken. He saw the black figure of Bear Bull swiftly slide under the outstretched paws of the shaggy animal, as if wanting to enter the powerful embrace of the tusked giant. At the same time, the Boy managed to realize that Bear Bull's movements resembled those of a man swimming underwater — they seemed slowed down. The Boy took a step after him, also smoothly, as if flowing from one pose to another. Now his arm swept to the right, now a heavy paw with gleaming claws froze above his head, now his face pressed into the fragrant fur, his cheek felt the solidity of the bear's body. The knife pierced the skin with a loud sound and sank into the muscle tissue up to the hilt. And then suddenly everything became incredibly fast. His armed hand, with lightning

speed, delivered several blows in succession. The Boy instantly jumped out from under the air-rending clawed paws, leaped aside, and immediately plunged the blade into the beast's throat, somehow finding himself on its scruff. Hot blood drenched his clenched fingers. He heard his victory cry merge with the bear's roar…

The powerful, shaggy body crashed heavily to the ground, legs twitching. The Boy, panting, knelt beside it and wiped his face with a sticky palm.

— Thank him, — said Bear Bull, not allowing him to catch his breath. — From now on, you receive the strength of this four-legged brother and his name. Show him respect.

The Boy, loudly gulping air and hearing his chest heave, knelt before the still-quivering carcass.

— Thank you, my elder brother, for the life, wisdom, courage, and strength you have gifted me. Forgive me for having to spill your blood. I will always keep your memory.

Still trembling slightly from the unsubsided excitement, but now feeling no fear at all, the Boy used his left hand (as it is closer to the heart) to scoop up the bear's blood and smear it on his chest.

— Now cut off his claws; later you will make a necklace from them for yourself, — ordered Bear Bull, — skin him and give the hide to your younger sister (she is still a virgin). Dry the liver and heart and carry them with crushed sagebrush in a small pouch on your belt. When danger threatens you, this amulet will grow heavy and thus warn you… Leave the bear's skull on an anthill, and when the little brothers have picked it clean, rinse the skull with water and place it on the stone where you were sitting when I came to you. Cover the stone with red ochre and pray to it as a manifestation of the powerful spirit Inyan. This will be a place where the Bear People can give you counsel. From the upper part of the muzzle, you will make a mask and wear it on your head during journeys… And now I leave… I will often appear near you to advise and help, and you will recognize me by my appearance today. But this form is only for you. Others, before whom I appear, see me differently… I leave you the knife with which you slew the bear. You can be proud of such a weapon, but do not let anyone else handle it, and know that you must not speak of me to anyone, otherwise my help will cease. A secret remains a secret; it is not permitted to be revealed.

And the black figure of Bear Bull, taking a couple of steps to the side, vanished.

In the morning, the father of Boy-With-A-Ringing-Voice sent a crier to announce to the entire village that his son had performed a great deed and would now be called Bear. Not a word was spoken about the secret helper, although many asked for details of the fight and craned their necks with curiosity to get a look at the huge knife with which the thirteen-year-old boy had felled the fearsome beast — a weapon he had not possessed before.

HORSE RAID

It was early morning when Two Humps touched Bear's shoulder and woke him.

— What is it, father? — the boy started to ask, but his father covered his mouth with his palm and pointed significantly with his eyes toward the entrance of the tent.

— Want to see an enemy? — Two Humps mouthed silently.

The boy hurried to nod in reply and carefully slipped out from under the hide that served as a blanket. In his father's hand, he saw a stout bow made from a large elk antler and three arrows. His eyes flared like coals under a gust of wind.

— He came to untie the horses, — Two Humps gestured, meaning the scout who had sneaked into the camp.

Two Humps placed an arrow on the string and positioned himself near the piece of hide serving as a door. Beckoning his son with a barely perceptible gesture, he slightly lifted the edge of the hide, and Bear immediately spotted the figure of a man cautiously moving toward the neighboring tent, where two beautiful black stallions were tethered. The horse thief was completely naked and painted from head to toe with white clay. When he stopped, crouched motionless, he looked like a large rock. Even his hair, stiff under the layer of clay, resembled dried grass.

— That is a very skillful and cunning warrior, — noted Two Humps. — But my hearing is sharp enough to catch even his silent steps.

He drew the bow and with his eyes ordered Bear to pull back the entrance flap. As soon as the tent opening was clear, Two Humps quickly raised the bow and released the string. It made a light, barely audible, snorting sound and propelled the arrow toward the horse thief, giving it the speed and force of lightning. The man jerked in surprise and grabbed his side. The arrow had struck him under the rib, and the tip exited his chest, having likely pierced his heart. The scout froze on his knees for a few seconds, then smoothly turned his head toward the source of his sudden death, and lay down on the ground. Blood quickly flowed from the wound,

reddening the white clay thickly smeared on the horse thief's body, seeping into the cracks, swelling in the white crumbs, weighing down the dry pieces of clay and making them fall off.

Two Humps dashed outside, crouching and looking around for other scouts. Bear hurried after him, grabbing the knife given to him by Bear Bull, and shouted loudly, overflowing with excitement. His emotions were spilling over, and the boy couldn't contain them. His war cry wasn't very impressive, but Two Humps supported his son, letting out a blood-curdling shriek that stirred the entire village. It seemed even the lazy fog stretching over the sleepy earth shuddered from the war cry of the skilled warrior.

A little ways off, Bear noticed two other painted figures. They rose from the ground and started running away from the camp.

— Father! — exclaimed Bear.

— I see them, son, — threw Two Humps and sent an arrow after them, but both figures disappeared into the fog.

Sleepy people appeared from everywhere. Men ran with axes and bows in their hands, women fearfully stuck their heads out of the tents but dared not come out fully, not understanding what had happened.

Two Humps explained in a few words to the comrades who had run up what had occurred, and five young men rushed to their horses to chase the fugitives.

— Who is it? — asked Bear, squatting near the shot horse thief and tugging the tip of the arrow protruding from under his rib.

— Psaloka. Look at his moccasins, son, he's a man from the Crow Nation. Touch him. This will be your first touch of an enemy.

The boy confidently placed his palm on the Psaloka and felt the rough surface of the clay with his hand.

— I have killed an enemy! — shouted Two Humps in a pleased voice. — My son Bear was the first to touch the fallen Psaloka! My son has done a great deed! People, today we will celebrate this event! I offer the meat of the antelope I killed yesterday.

— There are blood trails over there, — Otter Tail approached, pointing over his shoulder with his hand. — It seems, Two Humps, you wounded another Psaloka. Perhaps the young men will catch him outside the settlement.

Otter Tail turned over the body of the killed enemy and peered into his face. Women were already crowding around. One of them pushed through

the gathered people, holding a long knife in her hand, and without a word, quickly raised her arm above her head. The blade struck the dead man's shoulder and deeply cut the flesh. Blood splattered in all directions.

— This is for your people killing my son last summer! — the Indian woman cried out and spat several times on the corpse.

After this, a whole hail of merciless blows from clubs and axes fell upon the dead man. Within minutes, the Psaloka's body was turned into a bloody pile of meat, only vaguely resembling a human shape by its general outline.

— Look at your son, Grass-From-Water, — Two Humps said to his wife who had run up, — he just touched the Psaloka I killed.

— Was it a war party? — she asked.

— No, — Two Humps reassured her, — they came for the horses. But their expedition was not successful. Several of our young men rode after them; they will return soon and tell us if they found a large party and if it's worth pursuing. If our men are lucky, they'll take down someone else…

Some time later, Otter Tail and his friends came galloping into the village, shouting cheerfully and waving war clubs bristling with sharp metal blades. Behind the horses, two corpses dragged along the ground, tied with ropes. Every time the dead men hit stones, their outstretched arms twitched limply, and blood spilled from their shattered skulls, spreading thickly in the dust.

That evening, the camp filled with the sound of drums and piercing songs. Grass-From-Water, Bear's mother, danced, her chin held high importantly, before the fire built in the center of the camp; in one hand she held a pole above her head with the scalp of the killed Psaloka tied to it, in the other — her husband's bow and shield. Behind her, two very young girls danced with similar bloody trophies attached to spears. Other women followed, shaking the severed legs and arms of the Psalokas attached to sticks. The procession was closed by a little girl with huge black eyes and a wide white smile on her open face; she merrily hopped from foot to foot and clutched with both small hands a long strip of human skin with the genitals of one of the killed enemies, caked with dried blood.

Two Humps, dressed in a long shirt of deerskin embroidered with porcupine quills on the shoulders and adorned along the sleeves with tufts of enemy hair, gave a speech in honor of his son.

— On this significant occasion, I give one horse to the poorest person

in our settlement, — he concluded, and these words were met with cries of approval from his tribesmen.

Bear also took part in the dance around the fire, his face painted scarlet.

— When you go on a raid, I want to go with you, — he said to his father when the celebration ended.

— I think I will raise a party in two days. The young warriors are eager to show the Psalokas that the Lakota are more skillful at stealing horses.

— I will go with you, — Bear said firmly.

— Now you are considered a warrior, as you have touched an enemy. I have no right to forbid you. If you are ready, if you are determined, then I will include you in the party. But don't forget, you need to prepare well. Check your arrows and bow, see if the points are secure, if the string holds well. Don't forget to take spare moccasins from your sister for the journey. I saw she finished two more pairs for you; they will come in handy.

Late at night, when the noise in the camp had died down and only the occasional snarling of dogs could be heard from outside the tent walls, Bear still couldn't sleep. To his right, his father and mother were breathing heavily, vigorously copulating under the buffalo robe. Sometimes the dark covering slipped, and the boy's view was presented with his mother's naked thighs, between which his father's buttocks moved; the skin, greased with raccoon fat, gleamed in the dim light of the half-dead fire. The boy smiled quietly. It gladdened him to see his parents happy and without a trace of sadness on their faces. He liked to listen to the sounds of their union and inhale their smell — the smell of possible future life. Bear knew that soon he himself would grow old enough to be with pretty girls. But to make them accessible, he needed to attract their attention with his outstanding deeds. He needed exploits, as many as possible.

The thought of the horse raid into the enemy camp kept him awake until morning. Only near dawn did he fall into a deep sleep.

The next day passed in a flurry. Friends, having learned that Bear would go on the raid with the older warriors, came to encourage him. Some openly expressed envy.

And then the long-awaited morning arrived, the night before which Bear had again spent in impatient and exhausting insomnia.

With the first glimmers of light, Two Humps raised his son.

— It's time, — he whispered, trying not to wake the others, but Grass-

From-Water woke up anyway and, without a word, rushed to her husband, hugging him and pressing her face against his muscular chest.

— Don't be afraid, — Two Humps said, — everything will be fine.

She nodded in reply and silently followed her husband out of the tent. Near the entrance, a tall pole stuck out of the ground, bearing the scalp with which Grass-From-Water had danced. In the gray pre-dawn air, the outlines of twenty slender, long-haired men loomed. Each held leather bags and weapons.

— Is everyone gathered? — asked Two Humps.

The Indians nodded.

— Then let's go.

They left the village with quick steps. Here and there, figures of women could be seen near the tents, watching the departing party with anxiety. Everyone hoped for a successful outcome of the raid, but everyone knew the great risk of dying near the hostile camp. They went on foot, following the long-standing Lakota tradition of not taking horses if the goal of the expedition was to return home on captured horses.

Bear turned around. The village was left behind. The cones of the tents, bristling with poles at the top, were half-submerged in the creeping fog; between the poles, sticking out like the whiskers of giant insects, even streams of smoke rose peacefully. The boy felt something like sadness. Goodbye, childhood! Farewell, boyish games! Whatever the outcome of this raid, there would be no way back to the world of children. From this day on, Bear would belong to the world of warriors…

The endless plain, covered with thin stems of tall yellow grass, now looked completely different to Bear. Birds habitually flew into the sky from the grass, coyote ears slipped through here and there, but now the steppe filled the boy with tense anticipation.

For two days the party moved calmly, not particularly hiding. On the third day, Two Humps sat the warriors in a circle and lit a pipe.

— We have entered enemy territory. The Psalokas could be anywhere. Starting today, we will post sentries around our campsites. We make no fires. We sleep during the day, we move at night…

But they didn't have to go far.

That very evening, Wolf Killer returned to the campsite with hurried but silent steps from his observation post and reported the approach of enemies.

— Who are they?

— They look like Psalokas. There are twice as many as us, — said Wolf Killer.

— It could be the very ones who came to us. Someone must be in a hurry to avenge that horse thief I shot, — suggested Two Humps. — We need to find out where they stop.

— You want us to take their horses? — asked Wolf Killer.

— Why look for their camp when they've brought the horses to us? Tonight we will do what we must do.

At sunset, the warriors began preparing for the night's actions, braiding their hair and painting themselves appropriately. All who wore eagle feathers removed them so their white color wouldn't attract the enemy's attention in the night's blue. Scouts covered in wolf skins went to watch the Psalokas. Bear adjusted the pouch with the sacred mixture on his belt — the powder made from the dried liver and heart of the killed *Šakhéhąska* (probably the bear) and sagebrush, as Bear Bull had instructed him to make.

— Prepare the paint, — Two Humps said to him.

Sitting beside his father, Bear took out a leather box with buffalo fat, scooped some with one palm, and poured black powder on top. Mixing them thoroughly, he got a thick black mass. Two Humps, slowly dipping his fingers into the greasy paint, applied it to his face, thickly smearing his cheeks, nose, and chin. He never painted his forehead when going to battle or for horses, but if he managed to kill an enemy, he would cover his forehead with the dead man's blood.

Bear smeared the remainder of the paint from his palm onto his face, not too concerned about how he would look. He was more worried about the position of the sacred pouch on his belt, the necklace of bear claws, and the gifted knife.

The scouts appeared suddenly. Their faces looked out from under the wolf masks, excited and stern, their eyes burning.

— The horses are standing in that hollow over there, — one of the scouts pointed his hand into the murky blue of the evening, — and the Psálokas themselves are settled a bit higher on the slope.

— So, — concluded Two Humps, — we must cut them off from the herd. If we do it quietly, the Psalokas won't even wake up. How many sentries do they have posted?

— Two are sitting near the horses. We didn't see others.

— As soon as the moon goes behind those clouds, we will sneak up on them. Yellow Finger, did you prepare the shirt? — Two Humps turned to a tall youth sitting to his right.

— Yes, here it is.

— Put it on. The time has come.

— What kind of shirt is that? — Bear whispered curiously.

— This shirt Yellow Finger once stole from a Psaloka camp. He always takes it when going to the Crow Nation for horses. It smells like Psalokas. Neither dogs nor horses pay him any mind, thinking Yellow Finger is a Psaloka. And the enemies, even if they have a very sharp sense of smell, won't be able to catch the scent of a foreign tribe…

Two Humps gave a sign, and everyone moved toward the enemy camp. Although the Psalokas were on their own territory, they were being cautious; their fire was not visible. But Bear smelled the smoke and smiled at this smell — fire can be hidden from the eyes, but not from the sensitive nostrils of the Lakota.

The countless world of insects filled the air with chirping. The thick bushes near the hill where the Psalokas were settled rustled anxiously under a soft gust of the steppe wind. Bear looked at his father; he was pressed to the ground and completely invisible in his stillness. A large owl flew low over him, almost touching his head with its wide wing, but Two Humps paid the bird no attention. His piercing eyes stared fixedly ahead. It seemed to Bear that his father had even stopped breathing; the boy had never seen him like this, and for a moment he truly admired his father, completely forgetting where he was and why.

Somewhere to the side, a deer snorted briefly, and a whole chorus of distant wolf voices answered it. The bushes rustled again. Ahead, a horse snorted loudly. Two Humps raised his hand with the knife and signaled to someone. To the left, the silent shadow of Yellow Finger slipped, followed by someone in a wolf skin. Another horse snort was heard. The boy slowly crawled forward, carefully moving his body over the loose stones. His father looked at him and with signs told Bear to stay put and receive the horses that the warriors would start leading out. The boy nodded understandingly.

After some time, Bear was left completely alone. Dozens of steps away, enemies sat on the hillside; he heard their quiet voices, someone chuckled,

telling some story. And then the boy felt the sacred pouch hanging on his belt noticeably grow heavier, as if a couple of heavy stones had been thrown into it at once. Bear's heart beat ten times stronger, the hot throbbing transmitted to his head, and his mouth instantly went dry. Danger was somewhere nearby. Somewhere very close…

A shadow emerged from the bushes. In the light of the moon, which had rolled out from behind the cloud again, Bear made out an unfamiliar man with bangs combed over his forehead, thickly greased. A Psaloka. An enemy. It could be one of the sentries who had been sitting near the horses, or one of the men who had come down from above, suspecting something was wrong. The Psaloka pulled a war club with a round stone head from his belt and crouched down, peering into the darkness where the horses were milling. No more than two steps separated him from the boy. Bear could clearly see the fringe on the enemy's loose shirt, his bent knee, the sole of his moccasin, the wolf tail sewn onto his shoulder, the tenacious fingers on the club's handle…

The Psaloka didn't notice him and took half a step forward. Bear rose up, gripping the handle of the large knife, and with his eyes marked the spot for the strike — between the shoulder blades, right at the base of the neck, on the very edge of the porcupine-quill-embroidered collar.

The wind blew again, and the bush branches rustled noisily. Their rustle allowed Bear to rise to his feet without the Psaloka hearing him. The boy gathered himself, pushed off with his tensed legs, and, biting his lip to keep from screaming from fear and the sudden surge of rage, rushed at the enemy. The knife easily went in where Bear had aimed, severing the spine; the muscular body under the boy immediately went limp and thudded headfirst into the ground. Bear shuddered from the conflicting feelings boiling within him, pressed his chest against the motionless enemy, and for good measure struck the Psaloka under the left shoulder blade a couple more times. The enemy, a strong, battle-hardened enemy who had threatened the entire Lakota party, was dead.

Ahead in the darkness, Yellow Finger appeared with two horses. Seeing Bear lying on the dead body, the warrior scanned the surrounding area and with a nod ordered the boy to get up. Bear pointed the blade at the Psaloka's head and made a motion indicating hair cut from the back of the head. Yellow Finger nodded. Two Humps appeared behind him, a predatory smile flashing on his blackened face.

One by one, the Lakota emerged from the thick blue of the hollow, each leading two horses. On the belt of one warrior, Bear noticed long hair from which blood dripped onto his leather leggings. A little later, he saw a second taken scalp — on another youth.

— Cut the Psáloka's hair, — Two Humps gestured.

The boy bent over the corpse, and at that second one of the horses suddenly neighed loudly, pawing the ground with its front hooves. Voices came from the hillside, clearly puzzled that the neighing came from a direction other than where the herd should be. A questioning shout was heard, but the Lakota did not answer. Two Humps ordered them not to linger and to mount up.

Leaping onto the horses, the Lakota drove the remaining herd away. Noise erupted on the hill, branches crunched under the feet of running people.

Bear, who hadn't managed to take the enemy's scalp, looked back. He didn't want to miss such an opportunity, but the danger was too close. Making his horse circle on the spot, he looked once more at the white shirt of the dead Psaloka gleaming in the darkness. The killed man drew the boy to him, and Bear couldn't resist.

He jumped off the horse and bent over the sprawled body. The pouch on his belt grew noticeably heavier, but the boy paid no attention. Grabbing the Psaloka by the back of the head, he lifted his head and slashed with the knife, almost cutting his own fingers. The movement was too sharp and slanted; the blade cut a piece of skin with hair, but much smaller than needed for a full scalp.

— Go, — someone said in Bear's head.

Bear felt for the hairline on the dead man's forehead and pried it with the knife. Trying to suppress the nervous tremor in his hands, he carefully cut the skin along the entire contour of the hair and pulled hard, using the sharp blade to tear the blood vessels under the skin, feeling the hot blood on his hands.

Another moment passed, and very close by, pebbles scattered under someone's quick feet. Bear dashed toward his horse, but it shied away. He managed to grab its tail, pulled it toward himself, and jumped onto the back of the stubborn steed. Kicking the horse with his heels, Bear let out a victory cry and raised the heavy, bloody, hairy trophy above his head. The next second, the hard shaft of an arrow struck the boy in the buttock. He

cried out in surprise and urged his horse into a full gallop. Curses pierced the air behind him.

— Ha! We really gave those Psalokas a hard time! — exclaimed Two Humps when they made their first stop.

Riding up to his son, he took him by the elbow:

— What's wrong? You can barely stay on…

— The arrow…

They quickly helped him off the horse and laid him on his stomach in the tall grass.

— It's nothing serious, — said Spinning Raccoon, — the arrow hit him at the end of its flight. Of course, he lost a lot of blood, as the point tore the muscle during the gallop. But I can handle this wound.

— Don't lose the scalp, — Bear whispered over his shoulder, unable to lift his head, — my first scalp, a very important scalp…

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

I am very old now, but I remember my first warpath as if it were yesterday. I killed a warrior of the Crow Nation and decided to take his hair. I was so excited that I did not cut it from the back of the head, as was customary, but took it all, even the long braids were on that scalp. I had skinned the entire head of that Psaloka — from the eyebrows to the neck. It was a rich scalp, a beautiful one. A long eagle feather was tied to the hair at the back; it remained in place, though the tip had broken off when I killed the Psaloka and fell on him with my body.

I never again cut hair in such a way. I was hit by an arrow because I lingered too long by the dead man. When we stopped after a long ride, I collapsed from exhaustion. The arrowhead had torn the wound open, and I had lost much blood.

As I lay there, I saw a dragonfly hover before my face. It said:

«You must pay attention to the voice. If you ignore it, neither strength nor agility will help you. There must be measure in all things…»

Raccoon-That-Turns had treated my wound well, and it healed quickly. I stopped limping after a few days. However, I completed the rest of the journey to our village on a travois they had made specially for me.

We were very pleased with that expedition. The celebration for the successful raid lasted several days. I was honored as no one else had ever been honored in my memory. It is easy to understand. I performed deed after deed, and I was only thirteen winters old.

The scalp of the Psaloka hung at the entrance of our lodge for a very long time…

I went on raids often, for I could not resist the temptation to gain new honors. I was young and hot-blooded. I was consumed by a thirst for glory, a desire to stand out among my people. I enjoyed dancing under the gaze of the young women, but their attention was never enough; I was always left unsatisfied by the praise and honors my friends bestowed upon me.

I was waiting for something greater.

Today, I take no pleasure in remembering my war deeds. What was I doing then? I was stealing horses and killing enemies. I killed as many as I could. I had taken so many lives that there was no more room to hang the scalps of the slain enemies. In front of my lodge stood ten poles, thickly covered with human hair. From the abundance of scalps, these poles began to resemble strange animals. Then I stopped cutting the hair of my enemies. It gave me nothing.

Once, I led a party on another horse-raiding raid. We crept right up to the enemy camp. And suddenly I heard a rustle: someone was very close to me.

My sacred bundle, my *wotawe*, had always warned me of danger; I was used to it guiding me, and I acted with confidence in all situations. This time, it did not grow heavy at all, so I boldly stepped forward, my knife ready. Someone rose quickly from the tall grass. A single strike was enough for me to kill the person. It turned out to be a woman with a child in her arms. Her dress was pulled up to her hips, and I understood she had been relieving herself. I would have taken her child for myself, but the baby died instantly, hitting its head on the ground.

From that time on, I stopped taking scalps.

I simply told my companions that I had killed a woman with an infant. They were pleased and counted her among the total number of enemies killed by our party. During raids, any slain foe, be it a man, woman, or child, was considered worthy of counting for glory. But something in my heart changed that day. I lost interest in such deeds. There was no courage in them. I do not know why I had not thought of it before that day. I do not know…

I never again took a head. If I had to take a life, it was only in open battle. I left the dead untouched. Any of my warriors could take the hair or the entire head of an enemy I had struck down as a trophy. But I myself took nothing, except for a weapon if I liked it.

And yet, I loved to fight, for I was testing my strength against an opponent. I could not resist the opportunity to demonstrate my skill and prove my superiority over all. It saddens me to think of it now, but so it was.

Once, I dressed in a woman's dress, let down my hair, and entered an enemy camp in the evening. On my back, I carried a bundle of firewood. It

never occurred to any of them that right under their noses was I — the foremost warrior of the Ptarmigan clan! It was very amusing to watch the enemies.

It was getting dark. I dropped the firewood near a lodge and headed for the horses. I had picked out the most beautiful ones tied near the entrances. When the camp grew quiet, I calmly untied five horses and led them away. No one paid me any mind. Only one man suspected something was wrong. Perhaps one of those horses belonged to him, for he walked towards me with quick steps. How his face lengthened when he discovered that I was not a woman at all, but a man from a foreign tribe! He wanted to call his friends, but he did not have time. I drove my knife into his throat and immediately jumped on a horse. The dead man must not have been found immediately, for the pursuit started on my trail too late, and I managed to ride very far away.

There were many such amusing incidents in my life. It is much more pleasant for me to remember them than simple killings from an ambush.

Everyone considered me brave. But bravery means a constant struggle with fear. I was not brave; I was fearless. From a certain point, fear simply died within me. I speak of the fear of death. I realized that in life, you can avoid many things: you may not know a woman's love, or friendship; you may have no luck in hunting, but you cannot avoid death. When I understood this, I stopped fearing it.

Yes, there is much blood on my hands. But what could I do? I was young and dreamed only of glory, for which I was ready to risk my own life. It is foolish. I know it is foolish. Yet, it is common to most young men. It has always been so. It will always be so. The young live by passion and impulse, not heeding the voice of reason. And for this, my heart grows heavy.

WATER SPIRIT

The morning promised no good, for Old Beak had dreamed of a huge river monster, like a fish with horns, and smoke poured from its gills.

«It stood in our path and sneezed loudly,» the old man reported, wrinkling his brow thoughtfully. «Behind this creature, I saw a wooden house with light-eyed people sitting around it.»

«Pale-faces?»

«Yes, the Light-Eyed tribe. I do not like them, for I do not understand much of their behavior. Sometimes I even think that the Pale-faces are not people at all…»

Beak shook his head ruefully, and the four bone rings on long threads attached to his ear gave a soft clatter. The wrinkled face of the Indian turned to the sturdy young men standing around him, and they saw his right eye open. Usually, this eye was covered by a drooping eyelid, split long ago in a fight with the People-from-the-Earth-Houses, and it seemed dead. But now it had opened, the lower lid sagging, showing its pink inside, making the right eye appear one and a half times larger than the left.

Silence reigned for a while. The young warriors awaited the decision of their elder. Against the shining whiteness of the morning sky, their still figures looked like dark statues, only their long hair stirring in the wind.

«We will continue our journey,» the old man said after a moment's thought, pointing a brown, sinewy hand towards the still-unseen river. «The monster did us no harm in my dream. But your eyes must be sharper, and your hearing and smell keener.»

The Indians jumped onto their ponies, and within a minute, they had all vanished from sight. Only a black spot of ashes from the fire remained to show that people had been there. Soon, from behind the bushes, stepping cautiously with soft paws and sniffing the human tracks, appeared a large wolf. Pacing for a moment, it suddenly turned nimbly and trotted back, obeying a voice only it could hear.

And the party of Indians from the Ptarmigan clan moved along the slopes of the gentle hills, habitually pausing before cresting a ridge

to avoid silhouetting themselves against the skyline in case enemies were nearby.

Leading the way was Bear, crouched close to his horse's neck, whispering something to it. Ten years had passed since Bear Bull had given him the knife and helped him kill a bear. Now he was a renowned warrior. His leather leggings, like the war shirt hidden in his bag, were adorned with long locks of hair cut from enemies. The shield hanging on his back alongside his quiver bore the picture of a black bear with long claws.

Ahead, the wide ribbon of the river sparkled in the sun, framed by dense forest, when Bear stopped his horse and waved his hand anxiously to those behind him. The riders froze, tilting their heads like animals. Beak looked intently at the round-faced Laughs-Silently, who had stopped near him. The old man could no longer match the young men's sharp hearing and waited for the warrior's explanation.

They were near the confluence of the Elk and the Turbulent Rivers, where, according to scouts, stood the dwellings of the white people, surrounded by a wooden wall. The Lakota rarely appeared here, as the territory belonged to the hostile Psaloka tribe — the Crow People — and was also roamed by the Hohe — the Stone Boilers — who considered these lands their own. For now, the Lakota were only exploring this wonderful land, sending out war and scouting parties like the one led by Old Beak.

«Hissing,» said Bear.

«Yes, something is hissing,» the others nodded, «but very far away, meaning it must be very loud.»

Then one of the Indians let out a cry of surprise and slapped his bare buttocks loudly, making the long fringe on his leggings sway. Everyone followed the movement of his hand in unison.

From beyond a distant bend in the river (hidden there by treetops), smoke was moving. Moving right over the river.

«Ho!» drawled Laughs-Silently, stretching his neck. «The smoke is floating on the water!»

«What kind of wonder is this?»

«Did someone set burning trees adrift?»

«No...»

Talking thus, the party slowly moved towards the river.

«That smoke is heading to where the Light-Eyed ones have built their houses behind the wooden wall.»

«The Pale-faces have worked magic.»

«Beak didn't see that smoking monster for nothing today,» Bear remembered.

«Yes,» the others nodded, not taking their eyes off the billows rising from the green thicket…

Suddenly, they saw it and stopped, too amazed to utter a sound. Below them opened a clearing free of trees, beyond which a huge stretch of the river was visible. On it, chugging and churning the water, floated something enormous with two tall, straight black funnels, from which thick smoke poured.

«Unktehi!» exclaimed Beak, peeling open his damaged eyelid. «A Water Spirit!»

«I once saw,» Three Fingers said slowly, his eyes glued to the monster, «how an Unktehi pulled eight oxen underwater at once, but it never surfaced itself and didn't blow smoke. White Otter was with me then. He saw it too.»

«Those who live by the Sacred Lake say the Water Spirit has the body of an ox but the tail of a fish.»

«No,» Beak shook his head negatively, «you can see for yourself it doesn't look like a bison, but it does have horns.»

At that moment, the smoking wonder let out a long, drawn-out hoot several times. The Indians flinched in surprise and exchanged glances.

«When we return to the village,» Three Fingers began, «and tell of this, the people will make a song about us. We are the first of our clan to see the Unktehi.»

«That's not a monster,» Bear said suddenly. «I can see people on it. I think it's the big boat our southern brothers from the Bad River told us about. They often visit the Pale-faces there and trade with them. They said the white men bring many beautiful things on a big boat that moves by itself and blows smoke…»

At that very second, the horses jerked sharply, frightened by a rolling thunderous roar. Their owners grew nervous too. And for good reason — the floating wonder was enveloped in a white cloud.

«Hey! Hey!» came shouts from below, and up the wooded slope from the shore raced riders whom the Ptarmigan clan Indians, absorbed by the incredible sight, had not noticed until now. Suddenly, they found the Psaloka no more than ten meters away. The sworn enemies were

approaching quickly, now diving into deep shadow, now reappearing in blinding patches of sunlight. The Lakotas' confusion was so great that only three of them had the presence of mind to grab for their quivers. But the Psaloka, as was clear from their faces, had also not seen their enemies until this moment. Now, without stopping their horses, they made hand signs showing they did not intend to fight. They raced past on brightly painted horses, glancing over their shoulders again and again at the thundering water creature. The Ptarmigan people, bewildered, twisted their heads, now watching the warriors from the hostile tribe disappear among the trees, now looking back at the river shrouded in bluish smoke.

ARRIVAL

Standing among the passengers aboard the wheeled steamer *Assiniboine*, Randall Scott watched the approaching shore with visible impatience. The palisade and bastions grew before his eyes, and the faces of the people crowding the dock became distinct. Once again, a cannon boomed a welcome, eliciting reverent awe from the numerous savages scurrying near the water's edge. The excitement was incredible, both on the steamboat and on land.

Randall Scott squared his shoulders.

Here it was, the long-awaited destination — Fort Union, one of the main trading posts of the American Fur Company, where many came to sell or receive goods. Seventy-five days of travel from St. Louis aboard this floating vessel — no joke!

Randall walked down the creaking gangplank, listening with pleasure as it sagged under his weight. Finally! He was entering a world where no one knew him, where, true, everything was new, but this did not frighten Randall in the least. On the other hand, his bad reputation, enormous debts, and strained relations with the law were left far behind, beyond the countless bends of the swift river. Henceforth, nothing held power over him except for Mister Great Chance. And Randall Scott would not let it turn its back on him…

Scott dropped the heavy bag from his shoulder, brushed the dust from his coat, and automatically checked for the pistol behind his belt and the purse in his breast pocket. People bustled around: hunters, traders, clerks, mere onlookers. A motley array of clothing flashed by: blue woolen suits walked arm-in-arm with fringed buckskin jackets; behind soft fringe and leather laces shone polished brass buttons on black flannel; among beaded moccasins, one frequently encountered shoes that seemed lacquered, worn specially for this celebratory day of June 24, 1833—the long-awaited day of the wheeled steamer's arrival at Fort Union. The crowd formed picturesque clusters everywhere, the most varied faces appearing before Randall. Here were all the types the human mind could conceive. The only

thing missing was women.

Inside the fort were all sorts of offices, shops, and warehouses. Near the stable and the barn, people in shirts dark with sweat shouted loudly and cheerfully, a lone hammer rang out clearly. In the center of the fort stood a flagpole, next to it were three conical tents, whose owners had obviously gone to the shore to gawk at the steamer and share in the general excitement. Randall dragged his bag over to the cannon standing in front of the tents (its barrel aimed towards the main gate) and stretched sweetly.

«Hello, life!» he sang, and saw the enchanting azure expanse high above. «My heart now seems as generous and vast as the sky overhead...»

No, he was not one of the romantics; it was not the hypnotic beauty of mountains and lakes that had lured him to the Far West, but Randall Scott, this hardened thirty-five-year-old cynic, could not help but feel the charm of the world surrounding him.

The people he saw after disembarking and leaving behind the monotonous hiss of the engines immediately struck him as beings of a special sort. On one hand, they smiled broadly, and their smiles held frank cordiality. On the other hand, their faces remained severe, every feature expressing an unshakable determination to break the back of anyone who dared to stand in their way.

In the evening, the vast majority of the fort's population headed for the shops and bars selling liquor. It must be said that the main drinking establishments there were simply canvas awnings with a couple of roughly knocked-together tables beneath them. But even there, kerosene lamps shone cozily, laughter was heard, and midges hummed. And from the doors of the only real saloon, where prices were slightly higher and gamblers usually gathered, came the squeaking of two fiddles accompanied by a harmonica.

Randall managed to buy a handsome black stallion from a long-haired half-breed and from the same métis bought himself lodging in an Indian tent piled with fragrant hides intended for sale. The Indian camp around Fort Union was incredibly vast. It started right from the bank of the Missouri and stretched far out onto the plains. In any case, the encampment numbered no less than a hundred and fifty dwellings. The cones of the tents glowed from within with a red-yellow fire and, stretching into the distance, resembled stars scattered on the ground. Indian singing

to the monotonous beat of a drum could be heard.

Randall sat down at a card table and inhaled the thick tobacco smoke floating around his head. The card table instantly awakened the spirit of the cardsharp in him, which had been sleeping during the voyage after a long flight from justice. Randall cracked his knuckles. He saw the cunning squint of his gaming partners, their cracked lips, powerful hands with prominent veins. And he also felt the air, the foreign air of an unfamiliar country stretching beyond the fort walls. Randall understood that he had to play honestly, at least for today… But he cheated, and was immediately grabbed by the hand — they were sharp-eyed people, playing for pleasure, not for deceit…

«What do I see?» a thick bass voice sounded with a French accent.

Randall instinctively jerked, trying to free his hand, jumped sharply to his feet, and saw a shadow flash before him, which momentarily blocked the light of the kerosene lamp and with a ringing blow to the cheekbone sent him flat on his back. Falling, he caught the table with his legs and overturned it. The scattered cards flared up like white moths under the lamp.

And then a shot rang out. Randall heard it from somewhere beneath him, not yet realizing that he himself had pulled the Collier from his belt and pulled the trigger. The bullet whizzed under the ceiling, and the room filled with acrid smoke.

Later, Randall vaguely remembered how some force carried him out of the saloon into the darkness of the night, leaving the bluish powder clouds behind. There was rough shouting, stomping feet, chairs clattering. Within seconds, he was outside the fort among the Indian dwellings. Moving swiftly on half-bent legs and looking back, he reached his lodging, nimbly grabbed his bag, and, taking his horse by the bridle, led it away from the palisade at a run.

«Whizzed right past my ear!» voices carried. «What a skunk hide!»

«Who is he? From the steamer?»

«I'll be damned if I don't make him eat his own shit!»

«In the morning, I'll get to that pig and strangle him! Nail him like the rat whose head I chopped off in the shed today.»

«Rats again?»

«Big ones! Not rats, more like buffaloes, damn them…»

Several Indians sitting near the palisade, illuminated by the fire's glow,

watched Randall go with raised eyebrows but remained seated, legs crossed. The shouts and commotion behind him gradually died down, but Randall Scott did not stop.

The Indian camp near the fort turned out to be incredibly huge. Randall Scott walked through it as through a real city. Incomprehensible speech was heard from everywhere, drums beat here and there. Suddenly, several Indians and a bearded white man in a worn-out leather jacket blocked his path. They were full of calm and were smoking a long pipe. At Randall's appearance, they looked at him indifferently but did not move. He slowed his pace and went around them, not taking his eyes off the bearded man. He was a broad-faced man, very old and very strong, which was evident from his huge, sinewy neck rising from a greasy collar like a gnarled tree trunk.

«If it was you making that noise in the fort,» the bearded man suddenly said without turning his head, «I've no business with it. You need fear neither my fists nor my rifle. As long as you don't step on my corns, I won't touch you. If you want a bite, sit down here.»

«Thank you.»

«I don't know who you are or where you're heading,» continued the bearded man, expressively flaring his nostrils, «but I know for sure that on a moonless night like this, it's better to stay among people. If you join our pipe, stranger, it will assure me you don't intend any mischief sitting by our fire...»

«I had no such thought...»

«The pipe will convince me more strongly,» the bearded man grinned.

«Which way should I head tomorrow?» Randall hurried to ask after the first puff.

«Any. Depends on where you need to go.»

«I don't need to go anywhere.»

«Then stay here.»

Randall glanced back doubtfully at the fort walls and shook his head.

«Did you fill anyone full of lead in there?» the bearded man inquired in an almost indifferent tone.

«Seems not. But they chased me.»

«Everyone here is chasing someone. A petty scrape, a squabble like that isn't worth a trifling conversation. Ha-ha! I remember when I first came to the Missouri some thirty years ago, I managed to shoot a chief on the

very first day, in the village where I found shelter. Now that was a fix! And even then I wriggled out, as you see. By the way, this fellow here,» the bearded man nodded his shaggy head towards a thin Indian with a tattooed chin sitting to his right, «is my son and the grandson of that chief I laid low. And a couple of years later, I took the chief's orphaned daughter as my wife, and she bore me a son, a daughter, then three more sons. This is the youngest. Ha-ha! Such are the winding paths here, friend…»

«Where is your wife?»

«Died,» the bearded man spread his hands. «Everyone dies sometime. And in the open, it happens especially often. There are many claws, fangs, knives, and other dangerous rubbish here…»

RANDALL SCOTT

From the Diary

June 25, 1833

My lack of restraint will be the death of me someday. Yesterday, I almost shot a card sharp at the gaming table. Absurd and stupid!

I am homeless again. Pursuers may appear behind me, although the old man I spoke with last night assured me that I am threatened by precisely nothing, save perhaps a couple of good cuffs. Still, I decided to flee, as I clearly heard the words of one of those who chased me. He said he would cut off my head like a stinking rat. An unpleasant prospect, even if the words about the rat were a common local joke…

June 26

Today I met a strange-looking man in a large wagon. He introduced himself as Keith Melbraid. He looks about forty. Shortish, reddish-haired. Dressed in an old canvas shirt, long faded, and leather leggings in the Indian style (that is, only the legs are covered, and the rear and private parts are covered by a crumpled breechcloth, meaning the buttocks remain bare and gleam in the sun). His head is adorned by a heavily soiled top hat. A long leather strap, beaded, is attached to the back of the hat; it falls almost to the middle of his back — a pointless and inconvenient thing, in my opinion, like any other decorations, for that matter.

Keith Melbraid calls himself a trader. His wagon is indeed full of all sorts of junk. There's powder, lead, flint strikers, axes, knives, bright fabrics, fishhooks, mirrors, beads, and even a box with feathers from an ordinary domestic rooster. He says he's been bartering furs from the savages for these goods for about three years now. There are many tribes here, and I've never heard of any of them before. Keith can speak a little in some dialects but more often uses the language of signs, as he calls it.

Today we crossed to the opposite bank on a ferry. Keith believes a trader like him has no business on the side where Fort Union stands because the redskins from that shore can easily get to the white men's

goods themselves. Melbraid is interested in remote tribes whom the French traders once called the Sioux. Everyone has called these savages that ever since, though no one knows what it means. From him, I learned that trade on Indian lands can only be conducted with the government's permission, and the sale of liquor is forbidden altogether. Of course, strong drink still finds its way to the Indians, thanks to «free» traders who seek places where government agents won't catch them. Keith Melbraid is one of those.

I wonder what awaits me ahead? It seems a quiet life is not in sight, with redskins prowling everywhere.

June 30, 1833

We passed through an abandoned Indian village. On the ground, the circular traces where dwellings once stood were clearly visible. I approached the single remaining frame of an Indian dwelling. Many poles lashed together formed a cone, which was about half-covered with oak bark. The bark was teeming with fleas. In the center of this wigwam, as in other spots where tents had stood, blackened a fire pit surrounded by stones. Keith called it a hearth.

Behind this conical skeleton rose three platforms about ten feet high, on which stood crooked boxes made of tree bark. Countless ants streamed up and down the logs supporting the platforms. Melbraid said that dead bodies lay in the boxes. Between these burial structures stood a tall, bent pole with a large leather bundle at the top. A bunch of grass stuck out of it, and on long threads hung small, incomprehensible objects that swayed at the slightest breath of wind and knocked against each other. Near the pole on the ground lay several red-colored arrows in a semicircle and the skeleton of a dog.

The cemetery made a gloomy impression on me. What was incomprehensible and therefore mysterious affected me most strongly — the strange bundle and the trinkets near it. A sense of danger crept up. I realized that this is an alien world, that its laws are unknown to me, that I would not be able to negotiate (if necessary) with people about whom I have not the slightest idea.

I feel very uneasy now. I should have stayed in the fort and somehow settled the misunderstanding in the saloon, even if I had to pay all my money as a fine for disturbing the peace and give up card playing for a month, even a year.

July 2

Again we passed by burial platforms on which human bones were visible. Probably the burials are very old, the flesh and clothing have decomposed or been pecked away by birds. At the base of the poles lay yellowish bones, possibly human, that had fallen from the burial bier, but they could also be animal remains, as I saw several large skulls, seemingly equine. Keith assures me that the savages often slaughter their horses and hang their heads on the platform. Keith also claims that the redskins often bury the dead waist-deep in the ground, facing east, and leave them like that until decomposition. Terrible savagery!

One gets the impression that this country is overflowing with graves.

July 10

Saw buffalo. They wandered over distant hills and looked like black dots splattered on the slopes; these dots merged into spots, and the spots into a single dark mass. I never imagined herds could be so numerous. I suggested to Keith that we hunt, but he grumpily refused, not wanting to unhitch his mules for the task, and said we had plenty of meat from the antelope shot yesterday. He thinks it's better to reach our destination early and hunt there with the savages if I want to so badly.

He must be right. I'm just overcome with impatience. I never thought I'd want to touch everything I see here with my hands. Take the buffalo, for example. I firmly know I will see the hunt for these giants more than once and will take part in it myself. But the local expanses, the boundlessness, the freedom — it all instills in my heart delight and a thirst for activity. That's why I want to chase the bulls, experience the thrill of a primitive hunter in a primitive country.

It's amazing how closeness to nature can change one's perception of the world! Just yesterday I was an inveterate gambler, the space of the gaming table filled me completely. I saw and desired to see nothing but cards. I was filled only with cards. It wasn't the winning that interested me, but the game, exclusively the game, the anticipation of success or failure, the constant tension, the thrill. And now, a few days on the spacious breast of the prairie have etched out this love for cards, turned it to dust, and the ceaseless local wind has scattered it! I can't believe it, but it's true! The thirst to play has vanished.

Though, no, it hasn't vanished. One must be honest with oneself. It's just that I am ready to play at something else, completely new to me. Henceforth, my gaming table is the prairie. But what game is shaping up

here?

July 11

The day dawned magnificently today. A cool breeze blew, the grass swayed peacefully. Somehow, all the discomforts of the journey over rough hills and wooded valleys were immediately forgotten. Yesterday towards evening we reached a creek, which we couldn't cross for a long time, moving along its bed. The horses moved with great effort, pulling their hooves from the root-tangled bottom. In the end, we crossed to this side and immediately made camp.

It must be noted that the Great Plains look quite different now than they seemed from the steamboat. Then I saw much greenery, which is natural, since I was traveling upriver. Now the prairies are a continuous yellow carpet. The tall grass is mercilessly scorched by the sun. A solitary poplar or a small grove immediately catches the eye, their green crowns perfectly visible against the yellow grass.

Keith, as usual, rose before me and was already making coffee. He makes coffee, as is customary here, that is, he roasts it haphazardly in a pan and brews it with river or rainwater in our only kettle. That is, he has another six or more kettles in his wagon. But he doesn't touch them, saving these shiny vessels for trading with the savages.

THE FIGHT

The Indians dismounted and dropped into the tall grass, each laying out bags containing headdresses, paint in pouches, and sheathed weapons nearby… A few minutes earlier, the scouts sent ahead had returned and reported a small enemy party. The Ptarmigan people estimated when the enemy would be within immediate reach and began preparing for battle without haste. Hands scooped up paint. Now their faces would lose their own features, and the evil spirits would not be able to recognize them if any of the warriors died and tried to drag the fallen to the underworld. Many covered their faces completely with a thick layer: some blue, some yellow, some white. Some painted their faces in halves with different colors. Each had his own principle, corresponding to his inner voice. Chests, bellies, arms, and legs were also covered with patterns, according to the command of their guardian spirit. The paint was meant not only to frighten the enemy. Each new face, laid over the real one, necessarily held a hidden power that protected the warrior from enemy arrows.

Bear put on the mask of his protector, its fangs hanging low over his eyebrows. Two hawk feathers were attached to the left bear's ear. Bear's face was entirely covered in blue, except for his nose, lips, and lower jaw…

Unexpectedly for all, Beak raised his hand and said:

«I will die today. Our enemies have more power than we do. They carry the flying iron of the white men. Do not strive to overcome them, but I must strike down their leader. Now I will sing my death song, and you will smoke me with the smoke of sweetgrass.»

«Why do you think they have flying iron?» asked Three Fingers, surprised.

«I know, I had a vision,» Beak said quietly, without opening his eyes or raising his head. «Only Bear can take part in this fight. He never looked back once during our journey, so no cunning spirit could latch onto his gaze and follow him. He slept only under his own blanket, and no evil spirit seeped unnoticed into his body at night to bring him a foreign weakness that exists in each of us. And some of you used a common blanket. And

also... Bear has a strong protector. I do not know who it is, but a rare fighter receives such protection. Bear can take part in this fight. The rest should only frighten the enemy...»

Less than half an hour passed, and the Indians, holding their ponies back, rode up the hill in a single line. The enemy party should have been approaching the opposite slope by now. Beak let out a guttural cry, and the riders, covered in bright paint, surged over the hillcrest together. About a hundred meters away, the Psaloka — the Crow People — were riding at a leisurely pace. Like the Ptarmigan, there were ten of them, all stoutly built, confident after a successful raid on someone's camp. They were dressed in ceremonial attire and had painted their faces black. Ahead of them moved a herd of about fifty horses, and these very horses prevented Beak's party from launching a lightning attack. The herd milled in place, frightened by the loud cries of the attackers.

Beak furiously beat away the strange horses darting around him and pushed towards a rider in a magnificent headdress, whose long train slithered almost on the ground with every sharp movement of his horse. This rider raised both hands above his head with a loud cry, and a polished long-barreled rifle flashed in the sun. From behind the leader, a warrior shot out, rearing his spirited horse; on his head sat a stuffed falcon with spread wings. He already held his rifle aimed at the Ptarmigan, and a second later a shot rang out loudly, spreading waves of bluish smoke around the savage. Someone to Beak's right gasped and leaned heavily, barely staying in the saddle. Beak glanced briefly at the wounded tribesman and turned his gaze back to the enemy in the huge headdress. Before his eyes were hands covered in black paint, greasy marks imprinting the shiny rifle barrel as the Indian brought the stock to his shoulder. A moment stretched into eternity. Now the bottomless muzzle of the barrel leveled with Beak's eyes, then by inertia dropped slightly lower. And then the world went mad again, hooves pounding the ground deafeningly. Fire sprayed into Beak's face. A close-range shot slammed into his ears. In a fraction of a second, the panorama was shrouded in thick smoke. Beak felt as if a part of his body had detached from him, as if lost. Then it became hot right under his throat. From the outside, he saw himself sitting on his horse very crookedly, leaning far back and looking up. And then Beak screamed piercingly. With this insane cry, he dragged himself back from the abyss of death like with a rope, clenched a club with three blades at the

end in his hand, and, bursting through the powder smoke, found himself right next to the Psaloka leader. The raised sharp weapon descended swiftly upon the enemy, and its three steel teeth sank into the hot flesh.

Bear saw Beak plunge the mighty club into the back of the rider with the rifle and, falling from his horse, drag the enemy with a broken spine down with him.

From the rising dust emerged a slender man of black color. The horned buffalo scalp fitted to his head stretched its hair down his back, seeming to grow into the man's skin. The rider sat easily on a glossy jet-black stallion and pranced before Bear. In his hand was a long spear with locks of hair dangling near the tip and many small skins tied along the shaft. The rider looked back; on his entirely black face, eyes flashed and a snow-white grin of teeth appeared.

Bear directed his horse towards him, and Bear Bull — for it was he — nodded his head approvingly, as a real bear sometimes does, opening its mouth and nodding its shaggy muzzle. Then the rider burst into motion, becoming a blurry shadow. He tilted his horned head so low that it merged with the head of the black horse, and for a moment, to Bear — the only person on the battlefield who could see the black rider — it seemed that his protector had turned into a huge bull.

The Indian raised his bow, placed an arrow on the string, clenched three more in his teeth to save time searching in the quiver, and raced after the shadow-rider. He saw him jab the nearest Psaloka with his long spear and gallop on. Bear let fly an arrow and knocked down the enemy Bear Bull had marked for him. And Bear Bull stopped near Beak's dead body and waited. Bear reined in his horse right where the ghostly horse had been trampling the grass. Easily lifting the old man's body, he laid it in front of himself and started to ride towards his party. But the black shadow performed its mysterious dance before him again. A rifle from a dead Psaloka gleamed in the grass, and Bear had to take it. He scooped up the weapon without stopping his galloping horse, leaning out far and holding Beak's body with his hand. A warning shout came from behind him. Bear turned and saw a broad-shouldered warrior on a spotted pony, its neck and rump covered entirely with red handprints, very close. The warrior held a spear in one hand and in the other a small pole decorated along its length with hawk feathers and a stuffed owl on the top end.

Bear drew the bowstring and barely released the arrow when the thick

shadow of Bear Bull struck the heart of the rider with the staff, and the arrow loosed by the Ptarmigan warrior pierced the same spot.

Continuing their fearsome cries, the parties drew apart. Bear, straining his throat with all his might, spewed curses at his enemies and threateningly raised the picked-up rifle above his head.

Another shot cracked from the Psaloka side, and the Lakota galloped away.

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

The Crow. This bird was revered by many tribes. Our friends, the Cheyennes, gave the names of these birds to a people who lived north of us, in a beautiful country with many snowy mountains. There was indeed something bird-like in these people. The Crow people called themselves Absaroka. We called this tribe — Psaloka.

We had been enemies with the Crow Nation for a long time. And in those years, war with them was our main business, because we penetrated deeper into their country every year. There were many more of us, Lakotas, than Psaloka, and we needed new pastures for our huge herds. Their warriors fought bravely against us if our parties did not outnumber them too greatly. They were worthy opponents.

But when the Lakotas first appeared in the country of the Psaloka, which was a very, very long time ago, all of our people died. Thirty men from the Crazy Dog society remained lying in a foreign land. Then many of our parties gathered together — the They-Sow-Beside-the-Water, the Scattered Ones, the Twice-Boiling — and went to the country of the Psaloka. I heard in my childhood from the old men that there was a fierce battle. Our people managed to destroy an entire Psaloka camp and took many prisoners. Since then, there has been constant war between us...

Yes, they were skilled fighters, and we remembered all the fights with them. This may seem strange to you white people, but we often counted the years precisely by the importance we gave to one or another military clash with the Psaloka. That summer remained in our memory as the Year-When-Beak-Bravely-Cut-Down-the-War-Chief-of-the-Psaloka. Other tribal groups had their own reckoning of time, they celebrated their victories and mourned their losses. But events important for our entire people, for all Lakotas, did occur. Then much more serious cases entered the tribal calendar. Thus appeared the Year-When-Many-People-Died-in-Convulsions, or the Winter-When-the-Stars-Fell, or the Winter-When-the-Snake-Village-

Was-Destroyed. This was remembered by many, it shook many.

Today, nothing happens around me. One by one, those with whom I spent a long life are dying, and I must put them in the ground, as the white bosses at the agency command me. I cannot place the dead high on a platform so that the wind, sun, and rain turn the dead flesh to nothing. And I too, when my half-blind eyes close for the last time, will be nailed into a wooden box, lowered into a hole, and crushed with a stone. And I can do nothing about it. I am old and weak. But before, I was filled with strength. I was ready to fight without rest.

On the day of Beak's death, we were all seized with sorrow, our hearts constricted with despair.

Beak had been a mentor to many youths in our party, so they stubbornly insisted that we take the body of the fallen to our village. If Beak had died in camp, the relatives would certainly have dressed him in a richly embroidered shirt, wrapped him in hides, and suspended him on high poles. But those killed in battle, if the journey home was not short, were customarily buried where they died. Therefore, Lame Wolf and Red Marten, as the eldest among us, decided to leave him here. We only moved his body to a steep, wooded mountainside and there built a small platform of branches, securing it to a spreading tree whose mighty trunk overhung a rocky gully. We thickly painted Beak's face and hands with red ochre. On the platform, on both sides of the body, we laid all his weapons. We secured his shield near his head. At the base of the tree, we set up a small shelter where relatives could sit when they came to mourn him. After that, we cut the throat of the horse Beak had ridden during the fight and laid it on the ground right beneath the platform. I scooped up the pooled blood and smeared it on the roots of the tree. Three Fingers sprinkled tobacco around the tree.

Then we rode away. Laughs-Silently moved last, keeping an eye on Blue Arm, whom we had placed on a travois because a bullet had pierced his thigh during the fight.

The sun rose twice after that, and suddenly we saw a large wagon with two white men sitting high atop some sacks and boxes. The few Pale-faces who appeared in our lands usually used packhorses. A wagon was a novelty to us.

Yes, we rarely encountered the Light-Eyed in those years. We heard more about them. But once I saw white traders when I traveled south

to our relatives who roamed near the Shell River. Where its waters flowed into the Turbulent River, there stood a log fort where the Lakotas sometimes came to trade.

Now people with white skin had appeared in our country. We were surprised seeing those two. Our blood boiled immediately. We had never had the chance to fight white people because they did not interfere with us. But this time, we grabbed our bows and clubs. We thirsted for revenge. Beak had forbidden us to fight those Psaloka, but no one had said we couldn't kill the Light-Eyed.

My friends worked themselves into a frenzy with loud cries, making their horses spin in place, transmitting their excitement to them. Lame Wolf raised his hands to the clouds floating above us and began a brave man's song.

I raised my palm to the long fangs of my bear mask and pierced the skin on the back of my hand.

«Oh, my brother Bear, make it so the flying iron of the Light-Eyed does not harm us. We have lost a good man. We can no longer call ourselves victors when we return to the village. Help us, my brother!» Such were the words I spoke while the bear's fangs tore my hand.

Then Three Fingers rushed forward. He crouched low to his horse's neck, and the white men could not hit him. But they immediately shot his pony. It seemed to me they did not want to fight; they looked confused. One of them wore a tall hat with a long, beautiful ribbon behind it; he was shouting something at us. But we had already started the fight. We were already flying side by side with the Spirit of Death.

Red Marten rode in from the side and with three arrows killed the man in the tall hat. The second Pale-face was doing something with his weapon at that time. I stopped right in front of him and had already drawn my bowstring, but the white man was suddenly blocked by the black, horned shadow of Bear Bull.

«Stop! You must save this Light-Eyed one!» my protector shouted to me.

THE STRANGER

The rider closest to the wagon was clad in a feathered headdress, resembling a swaying crown. The round shield on his arm had a red border made of cloth bought or stolen somewhere, and it fluttered with the eagle feathers attached to it. Beside him rode an Indian with a bear's head resting on his own, its fangs hanging right over the savage's eyes. Behind them, other long-haired horsemen fanned out. Randall Scott had time to notice that some had fox skins draped from their shoulders to their chests, their paws brightly painted, with tufts of crow feathers dangling from the foxes' muzzles.

«Don't shoot!» shouted Keith Malbraid, glancing quickly at Randall, and threw both hands up, showing the redskins his empty palms. «It's the Fox Warriors… better to handle this peacefully…»

At that same moment, with a frightening whistle, two arrows slipped past just above Randall's head. A second later, another thudded loudly into the wagon's side. Out of the corner of his eye, Scott saw it quivering, its sharp tip buried in the dusty board. The savages' intentions left no room for doubt, and there was no time for thought. So Randall shot at the nearest rider, who was leaning to the side of his painted, maned mare, hiding from bullets. The horse tumbled, stretching its neck as it fell and breaking it, let out a terrible snort, and kicked its legs in the air. In the thick clouds of yellow dust kicked up by the thrashing horse, the Indian nimbly scrambled away on all fours, dropping his feathered headdress as he ran.

Then, from somewhere behind, a rider emerged, thickly covered in greasy white paint, shrieked something, and lightning-fast, released three arrows into the bewildered Keith. They stuck in a row along his spine, one under the other, like in a circus act.

The rising wall of dust, pierced by sunlight, filled with frantic shadows of men and horses. The paint on the savages' bodies and their colorful ornaments merged into one huge, solid brushstroke. From this flickering bright mass, the figure with the bear's head on its shoulders suddenly emerged. For a split second, it seemed to Randall that a real bear had

appeared before him, drawing a taut bow. The arrowhead froze a few dozen centimeters from the white man's chest.

Randall felt the arrow's shaft rip through the air and strike him hard in the chest… He staggered but stayed on his feet… Something had happened… The arrow remained on the bowstring… The momentary vision of his own death receded; the deafness that had plugged his ears turned into a whistle and then back into the familiar noise — horses stomping, people shouting incredibly loudly… The bear mask held the bow drawn but did not release the arrow… Something was happening. It seemed the savage was confused. He was as if listening to someone and couldn't believe what he was hearing…

Behind him and on both sides of the wagon, his excited tribesmen crowded, waving clubs and shields. The bear mask suddenly sharply lowered the bow and turned to them. In an irritated voice, this Indian shouted at the others and began waving his arm, as if shooing the riders away. They answered with indignant shouts. Someone raised a spear with a bundle of hair near its tip. But the man in the bear mask reared his horse and decisively moved against the indignant warriors.

«Hia! Hia!» he repeated, throwing burning glances over his shoulder at the white man.

The Indian whose mare Randall had shot had already taken the horses from the wagon and, clearly displeased with the bear mask's behavior, bent over Keith Malbraid's body. Two swings of a heavy club with sharp blades embedded in it were enough for him to sever the corpse's head. With a triumphant cry, the Indian grabbed it by its red locks and, riding up close to Scott, shook the terrible trophy viciously. Blood ran down the savage's raised arm and dripped from his dust-covered elbow onto his muscular chest, gleaming with grease.

Several savages were already rummaging in the boxes stacked in the wagon, throwing out colorful rags, sorting through glass beads, constantly uttering cries of delight.

Randall closed his eyes…

Suddenly, the Indians galloped away. One of them was sporting Keith's tall hat with its dangling, bead-embroidered ribbon. The last to ride off was the man in the bear mask. Before disappearing behind a hill, he stopped and looked at Randall for a long time. His pony impatiently pawed the ground, raising lazy dust. Then he spurred away and was gone.

Randall collapsed weakly onto the slashed-open sacks. Consciousness was ready to leave him. The sky swelled above him, now sucking the snow-white clouds into some kind of funnel, now lowering them right to Scott's face. At times, the sky became impenetrably black, and then the whiteness of the clouds became blinding, but after a few seconds, the azure returned and the world became familiar again. The settling dust smelled of horses.

That night, he covered Keith Malbrad's headless body with dry earth and settled down under a blanket near the wagon wheel. Quite close to him, a steep cliff rose like a huge shadow, emanating a grave-like chill. Randall couldn't sleep, the tension was too great. So he took a thick, leather-bound notebook from his duffel bag, undid the clasp on the thin strap, and began frantically recounting the events of the previous day. The reddish glimmers of the weak campfire floated over his tired face.

Closer to dawn, a distant shadow of a rider appeared in the murky gray air. On his head was the mighty muzzle of a bear. Seeing the terrible guest, Randall tensed his whole body. What could the strange savage's return mean?

Randall Scott closed the notebook and stood up.

«What do you want?» he exclaimed, stretching out his hand holding the notebook in front of him.

The savage grew wary. The paleface was pointing his mysterious object at him and seemed to be shouting incantations. Perhaps it was a small square shield? Every shield carries protective power, and every warrior's shield is different. The Light-Eyed One's shield is strange, but special power lives in incomprehensible things — even the most experienced shamans are often powerless against it. The Light-Eyed One's shield is strange. Its magic has roots in the unknown, which is why, perhaps, Bear Bull intervened for the white man.

The Indian shook his head. He would take the Light-Eyed One's protective object, and then there would be no need to kill the foreigner — he would die on his own without his amulet. Having reached this conclusion, Bear raised his hands to the lightening sky and, without taking a weapon, urged his horse toward Randall Scott.

«I am not afraid of you! Look! I am not afraid of you!» he shouted in his own language, approaching the Paleface. His palms were demonstratively turned to the sides. Riding up close to Randall and circling him twice, Bear suddenly leaned down and snatched the notebook from Scott's fingers. The

next instant, he spurred his horse and galloped back, still with his arms spread, but now one hand clutched the Light-Eyed One's mysterious thing.

Randall burst into curses. The savage's behavior made no sense to him. He was ready to fight, ready to die, ready to have a long, tedious conversation using signs. But he did not intend to be an object of ridicule for painted natives.

«Damn you, you stinking scarecrow!» Scott bellowed. «If I ever catch you again, I'll shove a rifle up your ass! I'll feed you your own shit! I'll pull a sack over your head instead of that bear face and hang you from the nearest tree!»

He stood alone in the middle of an endless, mountainous region through which he now had to walk on foot, walk to who knows where. He was a stranger, knew nothing, and now feared everything. He could have begged the Creator for protection, but he did not believe in God; he was used to relying only on himself, on his own strength. God remained a beautiful fiction to him, while the world around him always felt very real and often painfully so.

«And all this just because my damned hands can't hold back in time! I just had to cheat at cards!» Randall desperately kicked the ground with the toe of his boot, raising a fountain of dust. He imagined himself in the midst of a noisy crowd on a town square, where shopkeepers chattered cozily and women's heels clicked. Yes, a man cannot know where fate might throw him…

On the third day of his journey, dragging a huge bundle of provisions on his back, Randall realized his strength was exhausted. He had to pour out most of the contents of the sack, but even the little that remained at its dusty bottom pulled him toward the ground. At first, he tried to follow the tracks of the wagon he had arrived in with Keith. But the wheel tracks were lost by the evening of the first day. Now he wandered aimlessly. His feet constantly caught on stones and roots, the hot air wove complex patterns before his eyes, his dried-out throat felt swollen and stuck together.

In the evening, collapsing onto the ground, he discovered two motionless bodies about half a meter away from him, each with several long arrows sticking out. Small items were scattered around: pouches, bags, pieces of leather, wooden bowls, spoons. A little further away, Randall made out a large dog in the grass with its skull smashed.

«Devilry!» He winced, feeling nausea rising. The blood on the

dismembered flesh and on the ground around had already dried, but it was clear the murder had happened very recently. A few crows hopped nearby, but vultures had not yet descended to begin their feast.

Scott rose heavily, literally hearing his tired legs hum and feeling fire stream through them in finest threads.

«Need to get away from here…»

With enormous effort, he hobbled to a dark pine forest on the slope of a long green hill and fell onto the grass in the dying evening shadow of giant pines, whose dense tops swam majestically in the orange paint of a cloudless sunset.

During the night, he dreamed of quiet voices and muffled hoofbeats, but fatigue prevented him from lifting his head to check if it was a dream. In the morning, he saw fresh hoofprints on the damp bank of a thin stream babbling a few dozen meters from his sleeping place.

«So, not a dream… Lucky you, Mr. Randall Scott… Or maybe not lucky at all? Strike me dead if falling under the knife of the red-skinned brutes right now isn't the worst way out of my situation. At least I wouldn't have to suffer and worry about the unknown anymore…»

He bent over the transparent water, and a coolness wafted over him. The stream was so clear that the water was almost invisible; only an occasional twig sliding over the shallow sandy bottom slightly rippled the surface, causing ghostly light spots to form around its floating shadow. Randall plunged his whole head into the water and relished its icy touch.

«No, it's still a damn pleasant thing — life. And I bet I'll agree to wander a bit more through these godforsaken wastelands!» He stuffed a bland biscuit into his mouth and began chewing it with relish.

And at that moment, as bliss spread through his entire being, something seemed to push Randall. He turned sharply and was stunned. About a mile away from him, down a hillside sparsely covered with trees, a line of about fifteen riders was descending. And they were not Indians. They wore rough leather clothing. All held long rifles, resting the butts on their knees or saddles. Packhorses walked alongside the riders on leads.

«White men!» burst from Randall, and he shouted at the top of his lungs.

«White men!» the echo spread through the crystal-clear air.

They were quite surprised by the appearance of a man without a horse in such remote places.

«Keith Malbraid?» the hunters asked, shaking their thick beards. «No, don't know him… Not one of ours… Lots of people… Country's huge…»

«Which way are you headed now?» inquired Scott Randall, having calmed down.

«The same way we were headed before, friend. You won't throw us off our path. Ha-ha! We've got a full load of furs, so our road leads straight to the trading post.»

THE FORT

At Fort McKenzie, where the trappers had brought him, Randall was stuck for good. He wasn't a cowardly man, but his short journey with Malbraid had killed any desire in him to wander a country that had already shown itself to be so inhospitable. Besides, he had never felt any urge to travel, so, having some savings, he was quite content to spend his time at the fort.

For the first few days, he tried not to burden himself with anything, showing the inhabitants of the wooden stockade that he was terribly tired from the recent bloody adventures, which, without a doubt, had not been pleasant for him. Soon, however, he began to take on some work so he wouldn't be classified as a lazybones, a type nobody favored.

Within two months, he had grown accustomed to life at the fortified post. The land around him gradually ceased to seem deserted and frightening. Small animals scurried everywhere, birds flapped their wings, skinny coyotes kept popping out from behind bushes, deer swayed their antlers majestically in the distance, and the backs and ears of wolves flashed in the tall grass. But the most impressive sight was the huge herd of buffalo he once witnessed. Randall had seen bulls many times from the steamboat when they tried to swim across the river or came down to drink, and he'd seen a large herd while riding in Keith Malbraid's wagon. But he couldn't have imagined buffalo could be so numerous. They lazily flowed over the hills like an endless dark-brown carpet, swamping all the space around the fort. The sight of this endless avalanche of hump-backed animals took Randall's breath away.

There also turned out to be far more Indians around than he had previously thought. The places weren't deserted at all. Small groups of natives regularly arrived at the fort walls, and many tents were constantly pitched near the log walls of the fortified trading post.

As autumn approached, the savages began to disperse little by little, having finished trading with the white merchants. No more than twenty Blackfoot tents remained near the stockade walls, but three to five miles

from the fort, large villages were still standing, hidden by sheer cliffs and dense forest.

Randall woke up very early that day. The air was gray and murky, like frosted glass. Scooping cold water from a wooden barrel, Randall Scott rinsed his face and, snorting, wiped his neck. Near the wall, bales of furs covered with tarpaulin were stacked on top of each other. Beyond the stockade, the tops of Indian tents were visible, the poles sticking up like giant whiskers, splayed at an angle, forming the frames for the dwellings. In the pre-dawn gloom, the forest on the surrounding hills seemed impenetrable. Bluish smoke rose from the chimney of the cabin behind Randall.

Suddenly, into the silence, which seemed nothing would dare disturb, a sound spread forth, unlike anything else. For a few seconds, it hung almost motionless, like a drawn-out, monotonous howl, then it wavered and suddenly transformed all at once into an infinite multitude of voices that poured into the valley like an avalanche.

Randall rushed to a loophole cut in the wall and saw distant figures of riders. There were several hundred of them. Their bouncing outlines grew clearer with each moment. A Métis nicknamed Tom-Badger, who had run up to the next loophole, gave a crooked grin.

«Assiniboine!» he exclaimed and hurried off to get his pistols.

«*Levez-vous, il faut nous battre!* Get up, we'll have to fight!» another trapper shouted, beating his hand against the window frame.

A man of about fifty, wearing incredibly worn-out and dirty pants, ran out of a log building with a shaggy hide stretched over its door and spun his head around.

«Baron, the redskins are here!» Tom-Badger yelled in his face. «You'll get your fill of fighting today!»

The Blackfeet began running out of their tents, looking around in confusion. They weren't fully awake yet, and their movements were sluggish. They had spent the entire previous evening in noisy drunkenness, having bought a considerable amount of liquor from the traders. They had danced until late at night, depicting military clashes with enemies in their dances and counting their 'coups' (touchings of the enemy). Now, a real battle had suddenly descended upon them.

After a brief moment of thought, the Blackfeet dived back into their dwellings for weapons. They were too few to resist the attackers, but there

was no other choice. The Assiniboine were noisily approaching. The most agile among them had already reached the Blackfoot camp and were now darting between the large conical dwellings, shooting arrows into the soft walls. Two Assiniboine briskly jumped off their horses and attacked one of the tents as if it were a living being, stabbing their knife blades into the stretched hide. Hunters with rifles at the ready hurried from the log houses to the walls of the fort. After the first shots, the scene of the battle was shrouded in thick smoke.

«Listen, they're not attacking us, only the Blackfeet!» shouted Mitchel, lowering his long rifle. «Stop shooting!»

«If only we knew what they'll think of next minute.»

«We ought to let the Blackfeet inside, or they'll all be slaughtered…»

«Like hell! Then there'll be no salvation from that horde. Look how many there are! About three hundred men…»

The wind carried the gunpowder smoke away, and the motionless bodies of five women and several children became visible among the tents. Lavishly feathered riders raced in circles around the dead, dodging arrows shot at them. The Blackfeet ran up to the stockade, calling for the white men's help.

«I'll go lend a hand,» old John Emerson wheezed, slowly putting on his moccasins and tossing bullets into a spacious leather bag, while the younger men crouched under the log walls.

«Let's give them some pepper now,» said Baron Braunschweig with a strong German accent, smirking as he stepped to the stockade and pressed the rifle butt to his shoulder.

A shot rang out, and the weapon, jerking hard, threw him back two steps.

«*Mais je te trouve fatigué et un peu pâle, mon ami!* I find you looking tired and a bit pale, my friend!» a bearded Canadian laughed merrily behind the fallen baron.

«Seems I put in a double charge of powder,» Braunschweig lisped.

«Don't get involved, friends, this isn't our fight,» Mitchel said disapprovingly. He stood with his legs wide apart, hands on his hips, elbows out, like a master of the house.

But ten hunters still slipped through the partly opened gate, ran to the edge of the Indian camp, formed a semicircle, and fired a volley at the fidgety Assiniboine. They fell back, many leaning heavily from their horses,

wounded. The appearance of white men armed with carbines on the battlefield disconcerted the attackers. The Blackfeet let out a triumphant cry and visibly cheered up. After two or three volleys at the savages, the trappers scattered throughout the Blackfoot camp. Their rough, grease-stained, sweat-soaked leather jackets with long fringe moved like brown spots among the naked figures of the Indians. The Assiniboine retreated a few hundred meters and from there shouted curses. Many of them rode forward and, at full gallop, picked up the bodies of their dead tribesmen from the ground.

A golden sunbeam cut through the blueness of the morning air, breaking through the tree crowns, and fell on the pointed tops of the Indian tents. The day had taken hold. A minute later, the entire solar disc appeared above the forest, flooding the cold space between two distant cliffs with radiance.

Randall took a carbine and left the fortress. The gates were now open, and frightened Indian women hurried to take shelter behind the wooden walls. Blood flowed through the torn dresses of some.

«There's the reinforcements,» someone coughed, pointing to the left.

A small party of Blackfeet was galloping from the foot of the mountain, from the camp on the other side of the river. A little later, another group emerged from the wall of forest, having heard the sounds of shooting.

«Alright, issue them the rifles,» Mitchel ordered, «let them fight properly... Just don't forget to take them back after the battle...»

«Try and take a rifle away from them afterwards...»

The first three Blackfeet grabbed the long-barreled carbines and with delighted cries ran between the tents, waving the weapons over their heads. Randall saw how they found the body of a dead enemy near the farthest tent, one the Assiniboine hadn't managed to take with them, and stopped over it. They emptied their carbines into the corpse, reloaded, and shot the body again. Fired at point-blank range, the bullets tore the body badly, which clearly delighted the Indians.

Randall snorted and strode towards where the figures of the hunters were visible. Mingling with the Blackfeet, they advanced towards the hill where the Assiniboine scurried like ants. At times they rode forward, releasing a cloud of arrows, but immediately hurried back upon seeing the raised rifle barrels. New parties of Blackfeet arrived from neighboring camps, quickly crossing the level ground between the hills, flooded with

the slanting rays of the sun. The eagle feathers in their hair glowed.

By noon, the Assiniboine had retreated beyond the ridge. The Blackfeet would ride after them, then return. Randall caught an Indian pony, its mane woven with strips of some fur and crow feathers, and returned to the fort on horseback. He had fired only a couple of shots and quickly lost interest in the battle. He had long noticed about himself that he couldn't fight if he didn't feel excitement. It's like a fire can't start without a spark.

People crowded near the stockade, excitedly discussing the details of the battle. Randall walked to the far wall of the fort, where deer antlers hung from a tall tripod over a fire. A pot dangled from one of their hooked points, sending forth aromatic steam. Jack-Dog was stirring it with a long wooden spoon.

«I said right away it was a boring fight,» Jack smiled with his overgrown face, which had earned him the nickname «Dog' from the Indians, and adjusted the dirty collar of his embroidered jacket. «These Assiniboine are like all the other Sioux. They surely had a grudge against the Blackfeet, and had no business with us. I saw one of them shouting at our men to get out of his way because he meant us no harm. Redskins generally don't much like attacking whites. Though, I won't argue, a sizable pack descended today. But there are plenty of Blackfeet around too.»

«You knew they would retreat?»

«Yep. I looked at them and saw they were dressed well, painted up nicely. But they rode as if they didn't know what they wanted. Maybe they weren't even looking for Blackfeet specifically, but just anyone... It happens... Or maybe they'd already had their fill of fighting before this. I don't know. A redskin is no simple bird...» Jack-Dog brought the spoon to his mouth and tasted the stew. He was about sixty, but his voice, though with an old man's hoarseness, was loud, and his hands with dry, wrinkled skin moved easily.

«It seems to me,» Scott said, «that you sympathize with the savages.»

«I've been wearing out moccasins on these trails for many years, friend. Many times my worthless life has hung by a thread. And not just redskins were to blame. No, old-timer. I've been trampled by buffalo, chewed by wolves, and drowned by rivers. But I love life exactly as I have it here. I've grown old in this land. I have plenty of kin here.»

«From where?» Scott was surprised. «What kin?»

«Indians. I've managed to become related to them more than once.»

Seeing the bewilderment on his companion's face, Jack-Dog laughed. «I've had Indian wives. The squaws here are a special kind. They're hardy, deft, excellent housekeepers, but being a roaming hunter, I didn't always take a wife with me. Hunting requires agility. No point dragging a tipi around. Hunting is a man's society. And what do I need from a squaw when I return from a trip that lasted two months? I need her only to be a woman, so I can have my fill of her… Everything's fine with an Indian wife, but there are too many relatives. They, you see, are all happy to come visit you whenever they please, so sometimes they descend in crowds. And it's really bad when someone comes visiting from another village, then they might settle in for a month or two… I've had three wives already. One was from the Snakes, I gave ten horses for her, and that's a lot. But she died in the mountains, fell with her horse from a pass. The second was a Sioux, a wonderful housekeeper, but I returned her to her father because she was too quarrelsome, though she sewed excellent moccasins; I've never worn better footwear. Had to bring her papa all sorts of gifts when I brought her back. And the third was from the Bannocks. The Utes chopped her down… The best, in my view, are Lakota women. Remarkably sweet. Though mine had a bad temper… Well, it happens… I've seen many people, but no one attracts me like the savages. These red-skinned devils are much more to my liking than any smiling fur buyer in a trading post. The trappers here say that nothing caresses the ear like the howling wind in the mountains and the babbling of a stream. But there's one more thing I adore. It's the Sioux language. I'll tell you what: no violin in a saloon during the merriest celebration can compare with the ordinary speech of the Lakota. You can't imagine, friend, what they do with words!»

«Do you speak their language well, Jack?»

«Like my native Gaelic. I think I even think in their manner. *Lakota kin shunka Jack kagapi*. Jack-Dog was made by the Indians. A man becomes what surrounds him, if he accepts that surroundings. Had I not left Scotland, I'd be herding sheep like my ancestors, would be a sheep myself…»

They were silent for a while. Scott looked at the Blackfeet who had settled everywhere.

«There are all sorts of people here… Take our baron, for example,» Jack nodded towards Baron Braunschweig, who was pacing along the fortress wall, now going out the gate, now returning, «He's just gawking here. He's not with us. Maybe he's not a bad fellow, this traveler, but he's not one

of us. They say he made it to general during the war in Europe. But that won't help him become a mountain hunter. He looks differently. He breathes differently… If you're like him, you'll roll out of here quickly, having had your fill of looking at us or gotten scared of something. But if you stay on this land for at least a year, you'll remain here and nothing will make you leave this country. The mountains and the prairie won't let you go. You'll get used to laughing in the rain and the blizzard, you'll consider the sky your roof, and the pine forest your walls, and an ordinary house with the comforts valued in big cities will seem like a stuffy prison to you. Believe me, I know. I already tried to leave here for the States, but I almost died of boredom there. I've known others who found life here too harsh at first and hurried back to their cozy little cages, but quickly returned. Jimmy Wallace, for instance, in the basement of his stone house, would light a fire from wood chips in the evenings and cry. He told me himself. Then he gave up on everything, explained nothing to anyone, not even his wife, and raced back here. That was ten years ago. Last year, a grizzly tore off his leg and crushed his chest. And Jimmy died with a smile… I don't know what real poetry is, but it seems to me that the very air here is saturated with songs…»

WOMAN

A year had passed since the Bear had taken possession of the white man's notebook. Sometimes the Indian would take it out of the bag where he kept his most valued possessions and flip through the pages covered in small, intricate symbols. After that skirmish, people had started calling him *Mato Toke* — Strange Bear. No one understood his actions, why he had not killed the Light-Eyed one himself and had not allowed others to do it. At first, the warriors thought he had decided to take the foreigner captive and bring him to the village for torture, but they soon saw that was not the case. The white man was simply granted his life. He had shown no skill in battle, no miracle, yet the Bear had spared him. It was strange. But then, he often surprised the Grouse band…

One day, two families from the Red Water clan joined their roaming camp. They had left their group after a dispute with the community leader and had lived apart from everyone for almost a month. But such an existence rarely lasted long — the risk of falling into the hands of an enemy war party was far too great.

Among the newcomers, the Bear immediately noticed a young woman named Walking Fox, the wife of Young Wolf. This Indian had two wives. The elder was called The-Bird-Who-Guards-Her-Nest, and Walking Fox was her sister. Young Wolf had taken her as his wife after their father was trampled by bulls during a hunt. Their mother had then given her home to be torn apart by her tribespeople, symbolically handing them knives and axes, after which the crowd cut the tent hides to pieces, forever destroying the roof over her head. The old woman then sat for several days by her husband's grave, crying and speaking softly to his invisible shadow, and there she died of overwhelming sorrow. According to tribal traditions, Walking Fox, left without a provider, came to her sister's house and became Young Wolf's second wife.

Any warrior could have as many wives as he could feed. Young Wolf had two. Strange Bear had none. People whispered about it, but no one said a word to him. Even his father did not speak of marriage. Strange Bear

communed with the spirits, and people had little advice to offer him.

More than once, Strange Bear stopped near Young Wolf's lodge and watched as Walking Fox scraped a bison hide stretched on a wooden frame with a bone scraper. She worked without fuss, but deftly. Strange Bear enjoyed following the young woman with his eyes, admiring the slenderness and strength of her build as she walked with a firm step to the river for water. Sometimes he caught the glance of her shining eyes, but she immediately averted her gaze and turned her beautiful head away.

He never spoke to her, as such behavior was considered improper, but one day he decided to attract her attention without crossing reasonable boundaries. He dressed in a long ceremonial shirt, painted with small symbols and figures that told of his battle exploits, adorned his hair with feathers and colored rods listing his wounds, took his flute, and for a while walked around Young Wolf's lodge, playing a piercing melody he had composed specially for the occasion. Walking Fox came out of the dwelling and watched the Bear for a long time, then sat down near the entrance and began to embroider a piece of soft leather with red beads, not raising her eyes to the man with the flute again. She did not utter a word and did not respond to the Bear's musical courtship, but he was satisfied. The woman had seen him. He walked away slowly, continuing to play the flute. Some of the people passing by smiled, looking at him.

«Strange Bear's behavior is becoming less strange,» he heard behind his back.

«Let's wait and see how Young Wolf likes this behavior,» replied another voice. «I've heard he has an overly hot heart.»

The Bear did not approach Walking Fox with his flute again. One love song was quite enough for a woman to understand a warrior's feelings, if she had sufficient sense and intuition.

A couple of times, the camp held communal dances to celebrate successful horse-raiding expeditions into enemy lands. The Bear loved such festivities, loved the noise of merriment. Catching sight of Walking Fox in the crowd of onlookers, he would quickly apply his paint and join the dancers, trying to move as gracefully as possible and dance closer to where the Fox stood. He would glance at her sideways, twirling his war club in his hand and fanning himself with an eagle-wing fan, and note with satisfaction that the woman liked his dancing. This meant that she liked the Bear himself.

It happened that the Bear would sit for a long time far from the village near the yellowed skull of a bear and ponder something. A little ways off, closer to a narrow strip of a stream, stood the frame of a low, rounded lodge, where Strange Bear and his close companions usually conducted Inipi — the Rite of Purification. Above this place, clinging to a steep mountainside, hung a crooked dwarf pine tree, its branches laden with many pouches containing gifts to the All-Powerful Spirit of Life. Sometimes, a large white wolf would emerge from the bushes, its head lowered to the ground, and look expectantly at Strange Bear. The man would also gaze at it and not move. And so they would sit in silence, looking at each other. It seemed that the presence of one quite suited the other. Yet, neither relaxed; each was a predator and saw a predator in the other.

«I do not know what you want to tell me, my four-legged brother,» Strange Bear once addressed the wolf. «Perhaps you simply wish to be silent together. But perhaps you want to tell me something important. I cannot make myself hear your thoughts now, because my heart is occupied with a woman. I will wait for your words. One day you will speak them to me, my brother.»

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

I was respected by the people. There was always enough food in my lodge, even in the hungriest times. I saw the playful glances of the girls when I walked past them and knew they would be happy to have such a husband. And I enjoyed dancing with them at night around the fire, when it was allowed to throw a blanket over myself and a girl and stand like that, talking to her and even kissing her in front of everyone. During a celebration, no one could forbid it. True, after that, the girl's mother usually sent someone for a gift.

«You were with Spotted Deer's daughter,» the messenger would say. «Give him a good gift, so no one thinks you disrespected the young woman.»

I paid for the fun, as all men did. But I did not see my wife in any of those women.

When Walking Fox appeared in our camp, a string tightened in my heart. It was as if I heard a voice foretelling both sweet happiness and the bitter taste of trouble.

It was not our custom to stop and talk to a woman in front of everyone, because people might think badly of her. Some wives sometimes got into trouble because of attention shown to them by a warrior. It happened that a too hot-tempered husband would cut off the nose of an unfaithful wife if he saw her lying with another man himself. However, more often there were only rumors, though sometimes they became unbearable. Then the wife would announce the holding of a Feast of Purity, to which women who had known only one man were invited. I saw many such gatherings. The woman accused of unfaithfulness was always the one to organize and host this feast with treats. Each of those present would announce in a loud voice that no man except her husband had ever entered her body. Any spectator could step forward and dispute this if he had grounds. The Women-of-One-Man (as they were called) sang loud songs about the beauty and strength

of male organs.

I could not talk to Young Wolf's wife. I could not stand for a long time in front of her tipi, dressed finely, as other young men did when courting girls. Walking Fox had a husband. I did not want to insult her.

One day, He-Who-Paints-His-Forehead-White came to me and said he intended to go on a raid against the Brittle-Heads, whom we more often called Wolves. In those days, many Indians shaved the hair on their heads. I myself once saw a party of Psaloks in which five men's heads shone in the sun. My grandfather told me that our people used to often leave only a scalp lock on their heads. It is a shame for a warrior to cut his hair short today.

He-Who-Paints-His-Forehead-White wanted to avenge his brother's death. But he was not a renowned fighter, so he could not lead a war party — no one would follow him. He wanted me to lead the warriors. He promised to give me all the horses we could capture on the raid. We smoked the pipe, and He-Who-Paints-His-Forehead-White had my agreement.

All day before our departure, criers walked through the camp singing songs to raise fighting spirit. I also sang my wolf song several times. Sometimes, those preparing for the raid would stop in front of a lodge whose inhabitants were not going on the warpath and would wail before the entrance. In such a case, the owners were supposed to bring out something as a donation. It could be food or a weapon.

I decided to stand in front of Young Wolf's tipi. Very soon the entrance flap was thrown back and Walking Fox appeared. She looked me straight in the eyes and placed a pair of moccasins on the ground before my feet. I saw how she looked. It was the gaze of a true woman, the kind that makes blood boil.

In the morning, my party left the village, accompanied by many farewells. When our dwellings were behind the mountain, we heard the sound of a horse galloping. Young Wolf was catching up to us. He looked at me challengingly.

«I decided to join,» he said. «I came to the Grouse band from another community, and you do not know me. I do not want you to think me a poor warrior, and I will prove my courage in battle.»

«Have you lain with women in the last seven days?» asked Jumping-On-Stones-Ram from under his drooping wolf mask.

Young Wolf said he had not slept with women.

«That is strange, for you did not know you would go on a raid. Do you have bad wives?» laughed Red Ferret.

«I was fasting,» replied Young Wolf. «The-Bird-Who-Guards-Her-Nest carries my son within her. I was praying to the Great Spirit.»

«That is good,» I said. «A man should accumulate strength before war deeds.»

And we rode on, sending scouts ahead.

Soon we saw a small herd of bison and shot a fat cow. We ate heavily, so as not to be occupied with thoughts of food later, but because of this we wanted to sleep even before evening. We settled to rest in the same place where we had eaten.

In the morning, one of our youths became nauseous.

«It is because I slept with pieces of meat under my head,» he suggested, and said he would return to the village so as not to bring evil spirits upon our party.

No one objected, and we rode forward.

Usually the Wolves lived in earth lodges that could not be moved. But often they went out searching for bison and carried with them lodges of sewn hides, just like ours. The encampment we discovered consisted of five such tipis. I think those Wolves belonged to the Knife Spear warrior society, because before the entrance to the farthest lodge I noticed a spear stuck in the ground with a long, straight point, to which two eagle feathers were attached almost parallel to the blade, and along the shaft ran a wide stripe of red and black pieces of cloth sewn alternately. It was a rare spear.

We decided to attack them before sunset. The Wolves had very few horses. They had not yet raided anyone.

We prepared, painting ourselves in the best manner, and with loud songs rushed at the enemies when the sun dipped to the hills. The Wolves were not afraid and met us bravely. They were naked and gleamed in the setting sun. None of them managed to reach their horses, because Red Ferret immediately cut off the herd from them. We were on their camp, and arrows rained down on us. The Pawnee Wolves leaned out of the tipis, shot, and hid inside again. But some remained outside. One of them shot into our group, and Young Wolf fell with an arrow in his shoulder. I turned to face the enemy who had wounded him and thrust my rifle out in front of me. I was still not skilled with firearms, but I always took a rifle on raids — it

made a strong impression on the enemy. I would not have shot, as I did not hope to hit the target and did not want to waste powder. However, the enemy did not know this…

I charged straight at the enemy, aiming the barrel at him, and shouted. He stumbled, and the arrows spilled from his quiver. He did not want to retreat, that Brittle-Head. He intended to fight me, but his hand found no arrows in the quiver. And he ran from me. I smashed his head with the rifle butt and returned to Young Wolf.

We were outnumbered by the Wolves, and we retreated. But we had killed three enemies and driven off all their horses. They could not pursue us.

At the night camp we made after riding a great distance, Medicine Pipe treated Young Wolf's wound. The arrow had badly damaged his shoulder. For many days after that he could not move his arm. But he was the only one injured in the fight. We had won a good victory.

Before riding into our camp, we stopped to dress and paint ourselves according to the occasion, and in the evening we slowly descended into the village. We sang a victory song and drove the captured horses before us. After riding around the village several times, we stopped. The people greeted us loudly.

I was satisfied.

But Walking Fox was not among those welcoming us. Young Wolf dismounted heavily and asked his elder wife where her sister was.

«She is in the women's lodge,» replied The-Bird-Who-Guards-Her-Nest. This meant that Walking Fox had begun her monthly cycle. A woman was supposed to live apart from her family during her Moon Time, because the blood leaving her was considered unclean. Her presence in the home at such a time could bring misfortune upon her relatives. So she went to a special lodge where other such women gathered and underwent purification under the supervision of knowledgeable old women.

«When did she go?» Young Wolf asked sternly.

«On the day you left.»

«Then I understand why the enemy's arrow found me. Walking Fox was already unclean when I set out on the raid. She should have warned me!» He was irritated; everyone saw it. «Call the healer and the shaman. I wish to make a sacrifice to the Great Spirit and beg for his favor.»

All night the drums thundered, and the best singers from different

warrior societies delighted us with their songs. The wives and sisters of those who had returned from the war expedition performed a dance, holding the war trophies of their husbands and brothers. My sisters were very happy because I had given them all the horses that He-Who-Paints-His-Forehead-White had given me.

Walking Fox came out of the purification lodge the next day. She was fresh and beautiful. I rode up to her on my horse and blocked her path.

«Tonight I will take you away. If you want to be with me, you will not hide. I want to settle everything today,» I said to her and rode off. She did not answer me, but I knew she would certainly come out of the tipi after sunset. Something told me so.

I prepared my things, loaded them on the travois, and asked Running Hare (he was also from the Fox society) to wait for me outside the camp as soon as it began to get dark. I myself put on my festive shirt, whose sleeves and collar my sisters had adorned with thick strands of long hair from enemies I had killed and embroidered with dyed porcupine quills. On my head, as was fitting, I placed my bear mask, on the crown of which I had fixed two golden eagle feathers vertically, for the occasion was special, solemn.

As soon as darkness began to gather, I mounted my favorite spotted stallion and slowly rode around the village, leading a second horse whose face I had smeared bright red. In a loud voice, I sang my love song, which told of a brave youthful heart that belonged to the best of women. Our songs are very important to us because there are so many of them: for every occasion in life there is a song. There are common songs that all the people know, and there are personal ones that only their owner sings, because, composing them, he dedicates them to a specific person and a specific matter. I had made up my love song long ago and sometimes sang it far from the village, calling for the unknown woman meant for me by the Creator. Now everyone around was listening to my song and noisily guessing whom I had decided to take as a wife.

I stopped in front of Young Wolf's tipi and continued to sing. The surprised Bird-Who-Guards-Her-Nest appeared. Behind her quickly came Walking Fox. In her arms lay a blanket, a folded dress, and footwear with leggings. She stopped before me and raised her eyes to me. I jumped off the stallion, scooped up a handful of red paint powder from a pouch on my belt with a palm smeared with bear grease, and covered Walking Fox's

forehead with it. Custom required that the groom paint his bride's face with his own hand.

A crowd of people gathered around us, and everyone was silent. But as soon as we mounted and headed out of the village, the crowd shouted in approval and waved their hands. The-Bird-Who-Guards-Her-Nest burst into a long stream of abuse. Young Wolf appeared behind her. He leaned his whole body on a spear and turned his head, understanding nothing. But people were pointing their hands at us, and he realized what had happened.

I was sure he would not give chase, even though I had insulted him by taking the woman. He was too weak. Perhaps when his shoulder healed, he would decide to fight me, but not now. Besides, Walking Fox had come to him through her sister, and he had not purchased her from her father, as is customary among our people. She had cost him nothing. I, however, had paid Young Wolf with his life, carrying him from under the arrows on the battlefield. He could not forget that.

We reached the place where Running Hare was waiting for me with a dozen of my hunting and war horses and one horse with travois fastened to its back. I thanked him and sent him home, and I myself rode with Walking Fox to choose a place for our camp. We spent the first night under the open sky and only by the end of the next day did we set up our lodge.

Now I had a family.

THE LONERS

Strange Bear felt quite confident living away from the tribe. Usually, only exiles lived apart from the main camp, as a solitary existence in the wild world was the hardest test for a person. But Bear knew firmly that his patron from the spirit world would always warn him of danger, so he feared nothing.

One of the unpleasant aspects of such seclusion was the danger of losing the fire; it required constant supervision because the fire could die out, and starting it by friction was no easy task. In the camp, there were always fire-keepers. In those years, the Indians did not yet know that the white traders had matches, and they lit fires in all the dwellings from the common bonfire.

Towards the end of the month, Strange Bear faced an even more serious issue he had never considered before. Walking Fox started her Moon Cycle. In a normal situation, she would have left the family for a special tent, where, under the guidance of wise old women, she would undergo daily purification, for the blood leaving a woman carried impurities from the body and awakened evil spirits to life. Her sister or mother would have taken care of the household. But now, there was no one with them.

Bear sat opposite his wife and hesitated to do anything. A warrior could not undertake women's work under any circumstances. The only exception was during a wife's pregnancy, when even the proudest men would gather firewood for the hearth and help set up the tipi.

«I don't know what to do,» he lowered his head.

«I will continue with the household chores,» said Fox, «and you will set up a sweat lodge for me every evening, where water and fire will purify me... We will pray daily to the Great Power, asking it to protect us from evil demons...»

It was on that day that Young Wolf appeared.

He stopped his horse at the distance of an arrow's flight from the lone tent and stood for a long time, watching Walking Fox busy herself with

spread-out hides. He had painted his face black, meaning his heart burned with revenge. Part of his hair was loose down his back, and part was coiled into a large bun hanging over his forehead.

His first visit stretched over two days, and Strange Bear hesitated to go hunting for meat. When the figure of the rider began to irritate him, he took his rifle, jumped on his spotted stallion, and galloped towards Young Wolf. The woman watched his actions with anxiety. Bear, while moving, brought the stock to his shoulder and fired. The rival hurriedly disappeared behind a hill, but Bear followed him to ensure the abandoned husband wasn't hiding somewhere in the bushes.

The second time, Young Wolf rode up to the entrance of the tent, planning to rush inside and kill his offender. But Strange Bear noticed his approach from afar and hid in the deep shadow of a grove. When Young Wolf jumped off his horse, Bear rushed at full speed towards his dwelling, holding his bow and arrows in his hand. Charging at the uninvited guest, he beat him with his bow and drove him away, not allowing him to mount his horse.

The third time, Young Wolf waited until Bear left the tipi and, entering inside, grabbed his former wife by the hair. Fox tried to break free, shouting that Wolf was a worthless and cowardly man, but he paid no attention to her loud words and dragged her kicking body towards the exit. He hit the woman on the head several times hard to subdue her fervor.

Strange Bear had stopped, having ridden only a short distance away. A horned black figure appeared before his horse.

«Go back,» commanded a voice, and the Indian understood he must not delay.

Riding swiftly out onto the meadow where his tent stood, he saw Young Wolf throwing the unconscious woman onto a horse and heading towards the herd to pick another horse for himself. Bear spurred his stallion with his heels and, at a gallop, grabbed his bow and arrows from behind his back. His terrible, hoarse cry pierced the cold autumn air like a sharp knife.

Young Wolf looked back and jumped towards the nearest horse. He had barely leaped onto its back when Strange Bear flew towards him and, from two steps away, released an arrow. It lodged under Young Wolf's ribs with a sharp sound, its bloody tip protruding from his back. The Indian cried out and swayed heavily, not even having time to reach for his weapon. His eyes widened wide and fixed on the terrible wound from which blood spurted.

Large drops of sweat moistened Young Wolf's face, covered in a greasy black layer of paint. Strange Bear reined in his stallion and shot again over his shoulder. The bowstring snapped loudly, and the feathered shaft plunged under Young Wolf's left shoulder blade. The tip pierced a dangling leather strap woven into the Indian's hair and pinned it to his muscular back. Young Wolf's thrown-back head froze as if strapped to his back. Bloody droplets splattered across his bulging muscles.

Bear grabbed the bloodied opponent by the hair and threw him from the horse. He rolled his eyes, and a hoarse, barely audible song poured from his throat. Young Wolf was bidding farewell to the world and asking his deceased ancestors to meet and guide him along the Ghost Trail.

Strange Bear stretched his hands to the sky and thanked the Great Spirit for the victory granted to him. Looking back, he saw Walking Fox. She had slid off the horse, across which her former husband had thrown her, and sat in the grass, tucking her legs under her. Blood trickled from under her hair down her forehead. Behind the woman, the outlines of a giant rider with large horns on his head were discernible in the air. The transparent figure of the rider was motionless, and yellowish leaves torn from the trees flew right through it. One of the leaves floating in the air caught on the spirit's staff, trembled on it, but the ghostly outline dissolved, and the leaf continued its flight.

«Why don't you say anything?» Bear shouted to his invisible helper but heard no word in response.

Walking Fox raised her head with difficulty, thinking the question was directed at her, but remained silent, unable to regain her senses after the blows she had received.

In the evening, she sat beside her husband and laid her head on his shoulder.

«We have angered the spirits,» she said, staring into the blazing fire. «I brought trouble upon our home by staying here while unclean. I brought trouble upon you, my beloved husband. You killed a man from your own tribe…»

After this incident, Strange Bear decided to move to the camp to avoid further risk: Walking Fox could too easily become prey for any passing war party, and he couldn't always be near her. And he himself missed people.

On the day he told Walking Fox to take down the tent, Bear Bull came to him. He did not appear as usual in the form of a black figure but only

spoke from somewhere to the side.

«You do well to return to the people.»

«It's hard for Fox alone,» the Indian replied.

«That's true, but that's not the reason. I know your thoughts,» said the Spirit. «Don't try to seem tougher than you are. You are simply afraid for your wife. That's good. It means you have feelings beyond those of a fighter, it means you will entrust her to the people. You must not forget your people. I came to you for the first time when you were just a boy, to help you take your rightful place among people, and you left the tribe… Why? You weren't afraid of anything. Or do you think solitude will make you special? Don't hope, Bear. A man is tempered by living among his own kind. And do not forget that the people are the home where a part of your soul resides…»

«Do you think I was wrong to take another man's woman?» asked Bear, looking into the grey air before him.

«No. Your people have been accustomed to doing so since ancient times. A man must get the woman created for him by the Great Spirit. If Fox had not wanted to leave with you, then I would have advised you not to involve yourself with her… It's just a pity that you killed a man from your tribe… That is bad… Worse still is that you shot three arrows into him when one would have been enough. You are cultivating anger and hatred within yourself, and you have enough of those already… You left the Ptarmigan band without breaking any tribal laws. Now you return, carrying the burden of a grave crime on your shoulders…»

A sudden invisible movement twisted the grey air before Strange Bear into a ball and touched the savage's face with a broad and swift hand of wind. The Indian took a deep breath. His loose long hair stirred in a blue-black wave and fell again on Strange Bear's bare shoulders.

«When you come to the people, visit the lodge of a shaman who seems suitable to you for the conversation you need…»

«The conversation I need?» the man didn't understand, but he heard no more words.

Having prepared his personal belongings, Strange Bear approached Walking Fox and said that soon she would see her friends. She gave a gentle smile in return, feeling deep relief and impatience. They were going to their people.

At the end of each summer, the scattered communities of the Lakota

merged into large villages for the great buffalo hunt. Strange Bear headed with his wife to Bad Wound's camp. At first, he was a little worried that, besides the Ptarmigan band, people from Red Water's group might have joined Bad Wound, and among them were many relatives of Young Wolf. But upon reflection, he concluded that no one should be concerned about the fate of the deceased except for Bird-Who-Guards-Her-Nest, for the Indian killed by Strange Bear had broken with his community. And among the Ptarmigans, this warrior had not yet managed to attain a proper position.

Anyway, Strange Bear intended to join his tribespeople in about seven days.

But already on the second day of their journey, they had to stop for a long time. He discovered fresh tracks of horse hooves. Ordering his wife to hide in a dense grove between steep slopes and watch the herd, Strange Bear went on foot towards a overgrown hillock from where he could secretly survey the space ahead. Creeping up to a thickly woven shrub, he immediately noticed those whose ponies had left tracks on the ground, still damp after the rain.

Six Indians from the Wolf tribe. All shaved bald, heads painted black. They stood by their horses about fifty meters from Strange Bear's hiding place, their backs turned to him, discussing something quietly. The front one held a spear, curved at the top like a hook and wrapped along its entire length in leather with noticeable remnants of white swan down. At the top of the hook, raven feathers were attached vertically, secured in the form of a crown, and from the end of the hook hung a bison tail. Such a spear indicated that the Indians belonged to the Black Heads military society. Strong and dangerous opponents. Strange Bear knew this well. Dozens of glorious fighters, with whom he was connected by bonds of friendship and kinship, had fallen by their hands.

The black-headed men suddenly stirred; two of them stepped aside and quickly returned, carrying the motionless body of another tribesman in their arms. He was dead.

Strange Bear lay motionless. The ability to remain invisible was a good third of an Indian's fighting skill. Stillness made a living person inconspicuous, hiding him from the sharp enemy gaze that promised death.

The Black Heads seated the deceased on a horse; two warriors also mounted and rode next to the dead man at a slow trot, supporting him on

both sides. The killed man shook with his whole body, his head lolled heavily and sometimes fell onto his bloodied chest. The standing Wolves sang piercingly.

Strange Bear understood that the Pawnee were trying to bring their comrade back to life. He had seen before how healers and shamans would sometimes seat a recently killed man on a horse to jostle his soul and remind it that strength for life remained in the body. They also sometimes vigorously rubbed the deceased's stomach and even placed heated stones on it. But only once had Strange Bear witnessed a dead man revive after being alternately dipped in icy water and having hot stones rolled over his body for a long time.

The killed Wolf warrior, whose entire chest was covered in congealed blood, did not revive. Strange Bear took advantage of the enemies' attention being focused on the dead rider and slowly crawled away, frequently freezing for long periods near mossy boulders.

Reaching Walking Fox's hiding place, he ordered her to stay put and watch the horses. He himself positioned himself on a bush-covered hill to be able to monitor the enemies if they suddenly moved in his direction. He couldn't leave because his herd would create noticeable noise. He had to wait.

For the first time, a doubt crept into his head: did one man need so many horses? Such thoughts had no right to appear in a warrior's mind, otherwise they would destroy the foundations of male psychology. But their vague shadow had already fallen on Strange Bear's heart. Of course, each horse had its special qualities: one was meant for hunting, another behaved better during fights, a third was intended for long journeys during migrations and dragged the travois with a pile of household goods. But the herd… Now it was a burden, it threatened to attract the attention of enemies who clearly outmatched him in strength. Should he abandon it, galloping away with Walking Fox on two fast steeds? But this thought shot through Strange Bear's mind like an arrow and disappeared instantly without a trace.

Several hours passed before the black-headed men decided to leave their campsite, placing the deceased across a horse, having first wrapped him in a blanket. Strange Bear involuntarily sighed with relief. Now the road was clear. They could drive the horses further.

Walking Fox smiled broadly when she saw her husband lean back

nonchalantly on his horse and put his bow into the quiver.

«Soon we will be with our own,» she said contentedly.

«Yes,» the man replied, but his gaze grew dim, as if something was weighing heavily on his heart.

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

The band of a chief named Bad Wound was camped on the bank of a stream we called Black Pipe. We had barely come within an arrow's flight of the camp when riders came out to meet us. The hair above their foreheads was swept up high, thickly greased with bear fat. This hairstyle made them look like warriors of the Crow Tribe. But they were Lakotas and belonged to the Broken Arrows society. In those years, this warrior society had a reputation among the Oglalas no less than that of the Fox Warriors, the Big Bellies, or the Tall Men. But before five winters had passed, the Broken Arrows were gone. Many had died, some had moved to other warrior groups. Such things sometimes happened. In Bad Wound's band, I saw the Broken Arrows hold their celebration for the last time.

The Ptarmigan clan had already taken its allotted place in the great tribal circle. Next to them settled the band of Red Water. Near them stood the lodges of the Smoke People. Members of the Black Bear clan were setting up their dwellings; they had just arrived, and many were still noisily greeting their friends from other bands, visiting their campsites.

The Broken Arrows greeted me and Walking Fox with loud shouts.

«Strange Bear has not visited our tipis for a long time,» they smiled. «The young men of our village will be glad to invite the bravest warrior of the Ptarmigans to the solemn assembly. Today we will have an initiation into the Broken Arrows. We have already caught dogs for the feast.»

I felt at home. People were bustling about, excited voices could be heard, drums were beating. I was greeted as if no one knew or suspected about Young Wolf's attack on my home and that I had killed him.

But when Walking Fox set up the lodge and prepared food for me, the calm was suddenly broken. The Bird-That-Guards-Her-Nest entered. She stepped onto the women's side and sank onto the robes near Walking Fox. Her face was smeared with ashes.

«I have come to ask where Young Wolf is?» She looked straight at me.

A woman is not allowed to look at a man who is not her husband in this way. But she was in mourning, her heart was broken, and the woman was not thinking about rules.

«He attacked me,» my wife answered his sister, «he attacked me with a weapon.»

«He sneaked up like an enemy when I was not home,» I said. «I killed him.»

«That's what I thought. I knew he had gone after you to bring Walking Fox back. What am I to do now?» asked the Bird. «I have no one. Who will bring meat for me? Who will kill a fat cow for me on this hunt?»

«I will shoot a cow especially for you,» I told her. «You will not go hungry. And then I will take you to your relatives. Your aunts live in the Red Water camp. I will give horses to their husbands so they will take you in… I do not need a second woman…»

The-Bird-That-Guards-Her-Nest rose sharply. Even under the thick layer of ashes, I could see she was enraged. As she left, she turned and spat in my direction. I jumped up, ready to rush at this woman and slit her open from bottom to top with my huge knife. I was enraged: women spat with such contempt and disgust into the faces of captive enemies.

Walking Fox blocked my path.

«You killed her husband. She is alone now. I do not know if her kin will take her in. She has the right to hate you…»

The next evening, in the lodge of the Fox Warriors, the chief of the society demanded that I tell in detail how my fight with Young Wolf had happened.

The laws of our clan demanded the expulsion from the tribe of any person who killed a tribesman. Nothing could save the murderer from this fate, even if he occupied the most honorable place and enjoyed great respect among the people. He was obliged to leave the confines of the camp and live apart from everyone. Relatives were allowed to visit him only rarely, but no one had the right to help him. There was nothing more disgusting than killing a tribesman. We believed that such a person violated the tribal harmony; he disgraced not only himself but the whole people.

Four winters before this, I had witnessed how Blue Hand from Bad Wound's clan brought bad water from the Pale-Faces' trading post to a hunting camp, went mad from it, and hacked his brother to death.

A very strong and unfamiliar smell came from Blue Hand. But we did not know then that all people who poured much whiskey into themselves smelled like that.

The elders decided to drive Blue Hand away, but he did not want to leave. Then the Broken Arrows beat him severely and took him outside the village, tying a horse and his own quiver of arrows to a tree. He was left alone. His wife did not go with him but returned to her parents. Blue Hand decided not to beg for forgiveness and, when he came to his senses, rode away. And three snows later, he appeared again, set up a tipi not far from the camp, called his friend, and sent tobacco and a piebald horse through him to the head of the band, saying he was ready to return home. Then all the men of the clan gathered to discuss whether Blue Hand's return could be allowed. Some thought the stench had blown out of him during the years of exile, that he had cleansed his spirit. Others shrugged and warned that Blue Hand must be made to promise never to even raise his voice against anyone if he were allowed to live among his native tribe…

The old men said that the very nature of the criminal changed; he began to emit a stench. Only later did I understand that the shamans did not mean the actual smell, as others understood it, but a subtle matter that only holy people could see.

Blue Hand settled in his lodge and lived very quietly, showing his hot temper only on the hunt and the warpath.

But my story was different from Blue Hand's case. I was defending my family from a man who, although he considered himself wronged, had no right to attack me with a weapon.

«Come close to me and smell!» I shouted at the council of the Fox Warriors. «None of you will detect anything strange because I carry no guilt. Young Wolf stalked me for several days and intended to finish me off… Who from the Ptarmigan clan can accuse me of treachery? Who dares to say that I shirk from an honest fight? Are my brothers not insulting me by suspecting me of a vile murder?»

«Strange Bear does not smell as a killer of a tribesman should,» the young men said, spreading their hands.

«He saved Young Wolf when he was struck by an arrow of the Cut-Heads. Young Wolf was supposed to become Bear's blood brother and sacrifice himself if Bear were in danger. But he forgot about it and burst into Bear's home with a weapon! He turned away from the laws of the

tribe!» said my friends.

«And yet, Young Wolf was a Lakota, not a stranger. For his death, the guilty one must pay,» the chief of the Fox Warriors said weightily. «I believe Strange Bear must leave our warrior society. You point to our laws. And I also demand obedience to our rules. A Fox is not allowed to kill a tribesman under any conditions…»

I ceased to be a Fox Warrior, and resentment festered in my heart. I knew that the chief of our warrior society was telling the truth, but I did not wish to accept it.

That same evening, Long Tail and The-Man-Who-Sits-On-A-Tree came to my lodge and offered to smoke a pipe with me. They belonged to the society of the Tall Men. When the tobacco had turned to ash, Long Tail addressed me:

«I think the Foxes' action does not match the behavior of true Lakotas. Every Oglala should trust a tribesman. Young Wolf acted like a vile traitor and therefore deserved death and disgrace. The Tall Men believe you are worthy of an honorable place among our warriors.»

«We invite you to join our society,» confirmed The-Man-Who-Sits-On-A-Tree.

I did not hesitate and agreed immediately. Leaving the lodge of the Fox Warriors, I felt like a man from whom the most important thing — his honor — had been stolen. Exclusion from the warrior society deprived me of the opportunity to take part in men's celebrations, lead war parties, sit by the council fire. Now I was being called into the society of the Tall Men. I had not had time to appear humiliated before the entire village.

In the tipi of the Tall Men, a drum was beating. The society members, clad in picturesque ceremonial dress, greeted me enthusiastically. They had been waiting for my appearance to immediately begin the solemn rite of initiation into the Tall Men. Both chiefs approached me and announced that they needed another warbonnet carrier and that the warriors wanted to offer this honorable and responsible place precisely to me.

«He who is pure in soul and thought, who is holy, will be able to pass through all trials and win,» the singers of the Tall Men chanted.

Two men approached me and with slow movements covered my hands with red ochre and then thickly smeared them with a layer of buffalo fat. I was told to hold both my palms out in front of me, and the youngest of all present took a few coals from the fire with sticks and placed them on my

palms. The greased skin immediately sizzled... I had to slowly circle the lodge four times, each time stopping behind the hearth before the earthen altar, but only after the fourth round was I allowed to drop the coals onto it. In no other warrior organization was the initiation so difficult.

After I had done what was required of me amid a loud song, one of the chiefs sprinkled sage on these coals, and I bathed in the clouds of smoke. A medicine man stepped up to me and felt the blistered skin on my hands. He knew how to deal with such injuries easily and covered my blisters with some concoction that he spat from his mouth, having chewed it thoroughly first.

«Now that you have been tested by fire, my brother, you will receive the warbonnet with the trail. You know that each of the feathers symbolizes one of the exploits of the warriors of our group. Multiply the great deeds yourself and help others to be heroes!»

They handed me a bundle of owl feathers, the bases of which were painted red, and explained that at ceremonies, the Tall Men adorned themselves exclusively with owl feathers. They also gave me seven arrows, the fletching of which was also made from owl feathers.

I sent one of the young men to my herd and told him to choose any horse for the common herd of the Tall Men. Then I turned to the eldest among them and asked him to make me a war whistle from an eagle bone and a rattle for dancing.

Thus I became a warbonnet carrier.

After my clash with Young Wolf, Bear Bull almost stopped coming to me. In battle, I acted without his help. Only twice did I see him before the start of battles. He sat on a motionless black horse and held a long spear in his hand, from which hung the skins of small animals. Both times, a white wolf sat on the ground near him.

One day, in a dream, a youth with a sorrowful face appeared to me. He appeared out of nowhere, as if he had been skillfully hiding in the grass and now suddenly rose to his full height. In the darkness, the patterns of the Pawnee tribe were faintly visible on his clothing.

I was firmly convinced that I was asleep and seeing a stranger in a dream, so I did not rush for a weapon.

«You have come from the Wolves,» I said to him in my language, «what do you want?»

«You are not mistaken. I am from the tribe of your enemies,» answered

the strange youth, and I was not surprised that I understood him as if he were speaking the Lakota language. It could not be otherwise. He had not come by chance, and he had not come from our world. I knew this.

«My name is Pahukatawa,» he said, and I saw that his lips did not open. «Five winters ago, people of your tribe killed me on the bank of Wolf Creek when I was hunting beavers… Then beavers approached me and said: „His body has died, but he is not ready to travel the Ghost Road." The beavers called a wolf and repeated their words to him. After this, the wolf brought his muzzle close to me and began to breathe strongly into my mouth. I saw a part of me rise above my body and sit down next to him. The wolf continued to breathe into my mouth and sang a song: „Your soul is not ready for the journey on the path of the dead, but your body has exhausted its strength. You will live near people, using the power of animals. Rise, my brother, and go." I returned to my tribe, spoke with my brother, my mother. Chief Big Axe heard from them that I had not died and asked me to visit him. He immediately understood that I live in the world of spirits and that special powers are accessible to me. I began to help them in the fight against your tribe. But after some time, they said that their victories were owed not to me at all, but exclusively to their own skill. They ceased to greet me with respect. They began to speak to me as if I were a pathetic liar pretending to be a dead man. They forgot that a person is only a shadow cast on the ground by more powerful beings. They turned away from the Great Spirit and gave themselves over to the power of earthly affairs. My people ceased to understand that life is only a game… I decided to teach them a lesson and take your side. Let war become a terrible reality for them…»

He fell silent and squatted down. He bent his legs at the knees and placed his hands between them, becoming like a sitting dog.

«You can lead a war party against my tribe tomorrow, and I will be nearby,» said Pahukatawa, «I will help your warriors.»

He arched his back and stretched his arms forward, keeping them on the ground. The firelight grew brighter at that moment, and I saw that what lay before me was not a man at all, but a wolf of white color.

It was this wolf I had seen several times near the place sacred to me, where the skull of a black bear I had killed lay on a large smooth stone. The white wolf was a symbol of war for the Pawnees. He had been watching me for a long time, sniffing, coming very close, but not revealing

himself. This time he took human form to tell me about himself.

Many times after that, I saw Pahukatawa. He appeared at the camps of our war parties when we returned from raids on the Pawnees and were painting ourselves before the triumphal entry into our village. I did not tell anyone about him, but I heard that he had come to several other warriors. Many of those who knew nothing about the killed youth also more than once noticed a white wolf running near the battlefield. Jumping Salmon, Wooden Shield, Otter, and Creeping-On-The-Ground saw this white wolf. At times, he would throw back his shaggy head and howl prolongedly, as if performing a magic song. I saw how our enemies fled in panic upon hearing his voice.

Today I know that Pahukatawa was the next stage of my formation. He came to me not to make me a greater warrior, but to point out once again the significance of the invisible world.

THE HUNT

The camp had recently awakened, and in the soft blue air, the cries of children were beginning to sound here and there. The morning serenity was quickly giving way to the daytime bustle. Figures stirred everywhere, dispersing throughout the village.

The men known as the Camp Police had gathered in their lodge and were leisurely discussing matters of primary importance, while several of their subordinates roamed the camp, looking for a suitably fat dog — it was destined for the Police's cooking pot. A young man with hair hanging almost to the ground strode ahead importantly. He suddenly darted around one of the lodges, gave a short swing with his mighty club, and struck a shaggy dog that had yelped and, understanding the Indian's intentions, tried to slip away. The heavy, rounded head of the club smashed the red head between its flattened ears. Dog was considered a great delicacy among the Lakota, and no one could forbid the Police such a killing. An owner, wishing to save his dog from this fate, could only hide it in his lodge in time or drive it far away from the village. If anyone tried to restrain the Police, they could give him a serious beating.

The warrior societies played a crucial role in the daily life of the nomads. Considering the hot temper of the savages, which usually underpinned their actions and drove them to the most reckless steps, one could safely say that the authority of these warrior organizations was the only factor capable of restraining the Indians' fervor. A man took pride in his deeds and called them exploits, though often they were simply the antics of a smug egoist whose sole aim was to surpass his tribesmen in something. The desire to prove that his courage or skill was greater than others' often jeopardized the peace and even the well-being of the entire community. After all, it happened that adventure- and blood-thirsty youths would set off to raid a neighboring tribe at a time when the chiefs deemed it wise to refrain from hostilities. Only strict rules, enforced unwaveringly, could stop such ruffians. The guilty were beaten, their clothes cut to pieces, their weapons broken, and sometimes their horses killed. Parents always

brought their children to watch this, so that from a young age the necessary knowledge would be stamped into their consciousness.

The Camp Police were appointed only for the duration of the general encampment by various warrior societies. They strictly ensured that during the gathering of smaller bands into a common camp, not a single family or any hunter left the village on their own accord. The tribe was preparing for a big hunt and was making thorough preparations; the efforts of the shamans and scouts could not be wasted. Anyone who dared to venture outside the camp on their own jeopardized the success of the hunt, as a hunter could easily scare off the herd being tracked by the scouts sent ahead. Such a violator of the common order was often beaten senseless, and in cases where he actually frightened the animals away, he could even be killed.

The entire life of the nomads was built on such harsh rules, ensuring strict adherence to public order.

That day, the great hunting camp moved out and set off in the direction where the scouts had discovered a huge herd of buffalo, flowing slowly, like black lava, over the hills.

The hunters had already galloped off, leaving the women and elders to calmly take down the lodges and follow the men to the hunting grounds. The Camp Police party split into several small groups, and now they moved at a sufficient distance from the hunters on both sides and ahead, ensuring that none of the particularly eager youths would act hastily and scare the herd.

The Indians were stripped down, wearing only scraps of breechclouts and their quivers of arrows. They raced towards the rumbling herd, holding their bows in their left hands with arrows nocked. Their hunting ponies raced towards the buffalo at full speed; they needed no guidance, trained to come up on the right side of a bull and run alongside it until the huge animal crashed to the ground.

Strange Bear plunged into the black stream of buffalo flowing between the hills, occasionally rolling up the slopes in buzzing waves. Finding himself amid the herd, under which the ground shook, Bear instantly flew up to a fat cow and drove two arrows into her. His heart beat rapidly from the excitement and exhilaration that had seized him.

The buffalo split. The main body continued to run unswervingly forward, while several groups of about fifty heads each rushed off to the

left, sometimes scattering into even smaller bunches, then gathering back into a common mass. Many hunters gave chase to these buffalo, knowing that soon the animals' path would be blocked by the steep bank of a river, where the horned giants would meet their end. The promised bounty was rich. Now the riders did not shoot but shouted with particular ferocity, instilling terror in the cows.

Suddenly, the dark brown waves of the crazed herd rolling forward churned and halted their headlong rush: the front ranks of buffalo had plunged over the edge, and those following tried to turn back, but the mighty avalanche pressing from behind pushed the brown bodies over the precipice. In the greatest confusion, the animals crashed into each other but continued moving forward, trying to evade the shouting hunters who skillfully herded them towards the sheer bank. Some bulls, with a furious roar, charged the riders, sensing that these fragile figures on ponies were much easier to sweep from the path than the bellowing mass of their horned brethren.

Strange Bear rode off to the side with three other Oglalas and watched the grand slaughter. Such a spectacle could have been seen by the Lakota only in the times of their ancestors, when they lived far from these places, had no horses, and always procured meat by driving buffalo into a trap and pushing them over cliffs.

The golden, sunlit dust that had shrouded the area began to slowly drift away, carried by a soft wind, revealing the space where the few buffalo that had managed to turn back ran in zigzags.

The savages directed their mounts towards a gentler slope and soon reached the place where, for several hundred meters along the river, lay heaps of carcasses still twitching in agony. Many had ripped each other's bellies open with their horns during the fall, and intestines slowly spilled over their shaggy bodies and the blood-slick stones. Steam rose from the darkening carcasses — from which ribs stuck out here and there through battered sides — into the cool autumn air.

«A good day,» exclaimed Creeping-On-The-Earth in a satisfied voice, reining in his snorting stallion near Bear.

«Yes, the Great Spirit is merciful to us. We have plenty of meat now. The winter will not be hungry.»

Bear jumped off his horse and bent over the nearest bull. With a deft motion, he slit its chest and cut out the heart. He walked over to a large

boulder, stopped, and raised the quivering flesh to the sky. Blood covered his muscular arms.

«O, Life-Giver! He-Who-Gives-Movement-To-All-Things, accept this humble gift from us as a token of our gratitude!» He placed the bull's heart on the damp stone and turned to the dead buffalo. «We thank you, our four-legged brothers, for your life and your strength, which will now pass into our bodies.»

«We'll wait for the people,» said Ferret Nose, riding up with a broad smile, his chest heaving from rapid breathing. «Soon the women will start butchering. We can rest…»

Strange Bear scanned the riverbank. There was indeed plenty of meat. There was even too much. The clans that had gathered for the common hunt would not be able to carry away so much and, of course, would not take the hides badly damaged in the fall, as they would be difficult to stretch for scraping. The Indian shook his head ruefully.

«Why are you sad, brother?» Creeping-On-The-Earth asked cheerfully.

«I am sorry for those we killed needlessly,» replied Strange Bear. «We were not careful; the fire of the hunt seized us. Now some of this meat will rot. Horns and bones we have no use for will lie here. There will be traces of death. There were many such traces in the old days when our grandfathers drove bulls into a special place from where they could be pushed over a cliff onto the rocks. I once was in such a pound. Thousands upon thousands of bones of those we revere still lie there. Our grandfathers knew no other way to kill. We know how, but today we have destroyed far more than we need… And I grieve…»

«Don't speak as if this is the last herd. We were lucky today; there's no need to scrape every last tendon from the bones. The hunt was successful. We will take only the best parts and leave the rest for the wolves and coyotes. Wakan Tanka is almighty and boundless, like the sky above our heads. There are so many of these fine bulls, our providers, that they cannot all be killed. Why be sad that a few extra perished? We will hold a purification ceremony, and the spirits of the animals will not be angry with us.»

RED ELK

In the winter, a parade of the White Horse Society passed through the village. This society consisted of men who had earned the right to paint their horses. Members of the White Horse Society could belong to various warrior organizations, and they were all held in high esteem by the band. Such a parade was a very colorful spectacle because the listed battle exploits — handprints, hoof marks, and other honors — stood out especially vividly on the white horses.

The Indians galloped through the camp with loud cries. They reined in their white horses in front of the lodges of those who had been wounded in battle and sang a praise song. Then the man's wife or sister would come out and bring a treat for the parade participants, which was placed in the middle of the circle they had formed.

The snow-covered dwelling where the riders had stopped belonged to Red Elk. This Indian had reached an advanced age when a man no longer goes on war parties. Even before, he had rarely set out on raids against enemies, yet everyone called him a great warrior, though no one could say exactly how or when he had distinguished himself among his people. He had an excellent knowledge of herbs and practiced healing but did not call himself a medicine man. He claimed that every true warrior must know medicine. There was talk that guests from the invisible world of the dead frequently visited his home, so people were somewhat afraid of Red Elk and gave his dwelling a wide berth.

This time, he had gone hunting and had not returned for a long time. Warm Hands, his wife, paced anxiously around the tipi, peering into the thick, snowy expanse where Red Elk had disappeared. Finally, unable to wait any longer and driven by a bad feeling, she mounted her pony and set off following his tracks, which were already barely distinguishable, being covered by the icy wind.

It turned out that two Blackfeet had attacked Red Elk while he was butchering a deer carcass and had stabbed him in the chest with a spear. The one who had struck him raised his spear for another blow, but Red Elk

threw his knife. The blade tore open the attacker's throat. The second Blackfoot sat on his horse and wanted to gallop away, but the horse got stuck in a snowdrift. Red Elk managed to pick up his bow and brought the enemy down with an arrow.

His wife found him in the bloodied, churned-up snow. The spear was still protruding from the Indian's chest, and he was holding it with both hands. A little later, Strange Bear and Thunder Man came galloping up; they had seen Warm Hands leave the village. They pulled out the spear and seated the wounded man on a horse, as they couldn't waste time looking for poles suitable for a travois.

Now Red Elk, dressed in a picturesque shirt, came out with his wife to meet the White Horses. Strange Bear was astonished, for just yesterday he had seen him lying motionless in a frozen pool of blood, nearly dead. Where had he found the strength to stand? Where did such calmness on his face come from? He was also surprised that none of the White Horse group greeted Red Elk, as if he weren't there.

Warm Hands silently placed venison before the gathered warriors, adjusted the heavy buffalo robe (worn fur-side down) that had slipped from her shoulder, and went back into the lodge with Red Elk. Strange Bear noticed with amazement that there were no footprints in the snow where Red Elk had been standing! A moment later, Red Elk stepped out of the tipi again, but now his face was thickly smeared with ash. Staring more intently, Strange Bear saw that it was not a man before him, but a shadow.

«Do you see me?» asked the shadow as the Indians jumped off their white horses and happily tossed pieces of venison into their mouths.

Strange Bear nodded. He remained in the saddle, staring at the specter swaying before him.

«If you wish to speak with me,» the shadow of Red Elk spoke again, «then hurry, for I will die soon.»

Red Elk's face made an odd grimace, and Strange Bear clearly discerned beneath the layer of ash the features not of his tribesman, but of Pa-hú-ka-ta-wa. The spirit of the youth from the Pawnee tribe, who had helped the Oglalas in the war against his own people, raised his hands to the stirring snow clouds, shook his head, and turned into a complete stranger. His head quickly became covered in black fur, and two huge horns emerged from it. The stranger darkened and became Bear Bull. But this figure, too, did not remain true to its form. The specter grabbed the bull's horns with both

hands and tore off the black shadow. Now Bear saw, two steps away from him, a completely naked infant, whose body was the size of a tall man.

Strange Bear jumped off his horse and reached out his hand to the giant child, but it somersaulted over its head, curled into a ball, and when it uncurled again, it was a deer, which took several large leaps and disappeared.

Startled, the Indian fell and heard the laughter of his comrades. They were pointing at him, amused that he had lost his balance on flat ground.

«Did you not see what just happened?!» he exclaimed.

But they had seen nothing. They just repeated, licking their fingers, that Warm Hands had cooked very tasty meat. Lame Dog handed him a bone with a hefty piece from which fragrant steam rose.

«Ride on!» Bear suddenly shouted, making a sharp gesture and refusing the offered treat.

The Indians shrugged and mounted their horses.

«A Very Strange Bear!» one of them said, wiping his hands on his buckskin leggings, leaving greasy marks.

The riders began a song and galloped away. The horses' hooves beat softly on the snow.

Left alone near the lodge, Bear looked around. The spectators who had gathered around were slowly dispersing, wrapping themselves in blankets. Strange Bear shifted from foot to foot, turned towards the tipi entrance, and coughed loudly.

«May a friend enter your home?»

«Come in, Bear,» he heard a voice.

Red Elk was half-lying on a bed of buffalo robes with a backrest of willow rods, but upon the guest's appearance, he told his wife to help him sit up. His chest was bound with leather straps, under which lay pieces of raw hide covering the herb-poulticed wound. He gestured to his left and invited Bear to sit.

«I know what you want to ask me,» Red Elk moved his dry lips with difficulty. «Do you remember when Bear Bull suggested you speak with a shaman?»

Strange Bear shuddered. How did this man know the name of his spirit guardian? He had never before felt such superstitious terror as at that moment. He looked into the clouded eyes of Red Elk and tensely awaited the next words. What else could this mysterious old man know that no one

else could possibly know?

«Do not be surprised, my friend… You have no time for surprises… I can see the past. I can be inside other people… You wanted to ask if I had just appeared before you? Yes, I came out to your friends just now, and you saw me, but I did not go out in my body. You have the ability to see what is hidden from other eyes. I came out to give you a sign. I had to attract your attention because you are too engrossed in military matters and have begun to forget more important things… My time is ended. You saw me among the other dead. You saw the deer I shot, with whom I am now becoming one, for I have already set one foot in the land of the dead. You saw the infant, which we all are, for we are all children of the Heavenly Father…»

«How do you know the name of my guardian?» Bear couldn't refrain from asking.

«The one you consider your guardian is yourself. You have been constantly talking to your shadow, your double. Every person has a double in the invisible world. Most of those who communicate with a guardian are actually talking to themselves without realizing it. A person has many doubles; one lives among the animal spirits, another among the plant spirits, a third among the stones. All doubles exist simultaneously with the spirit of the person himself, which is why a person is one with the entire universe. He is part of the Great Mystery, which has no beginning, no end, no boundaries between different forms. Our doubles are near the spirits of the dead, which is why it is through them that our departed ancestors speak to us and sometimes predict our future with great accuracy. But few people know how to determine who exactly is speaking with them. This requires special knowledge. Often, other spirits converse with a person, but it was your double who communicated with you.»

«But he called himself the guardian of those who must awaken and of the four-legged brothers. I am a guardian to no one.»

«Do not rush. You are destined to climb the mountain of knowledge and help others. You are a human, and humans were created to support the life of all beings, their own kind and the animals… Why do you think purification ceremonies are held after a hunt? Not simply to ask forgiveness from this or that nation of four-leggeds or wingeds, but to bring oneself into complete harmony with the whole world, to free oneself from the bad influence of the forces that live in the blood of our victims. The blood

flowing from any living being is always impure. In the blood resides the beginning of immortal life, the beginning of *Ni*, that is, what gives a person Power. This is the only personal thing a person, and indeed any living creature, possesses. We own nothing else — not horses, not weapons, not women… That is why any shedding of blood affects the *Ni*. Therefore, purification is needed. We, humans, must know and remember this, for the animals do not know it. They are beautiful, but their spirit is as far below ours as ours is below the Great Spirit.»

«I don't understand… Tell me, father, what about enemies? We spill their blood in war…»

«I am glad you asked, because for you now there is nothing more important than this question… In ancient, very ancient times, much on earth was arranged differently than today. The grandfathers of our grandfathers had not yet even been thought of to be born — that is how long ago it was. Back then, they knew no greater defilement than the shedding of blood. People lived in harmony with all the animals. The Great Spirit gave them food that they have no concept of today. But once, one of the people received an *ihanblapi*, a sacred vision, in which someone told him that all people are also animals. And he became like an animal and tasted meat. Then the Life-Giver spoke to the people and explained that the blood that had gotten on the offender had made him unclean. So, to rid themselves of the criminal, his people killed him. However, the Great Spirit told them that they had acted hastily and had defiled themselves with the spilled blood and that they needed to perform a purification ceremony. Thus, people set foot on the path of bloodshed, killing those they considered guilty, and began conducting regular purifications of soul and body. The Great Essence-That-Is-Above-All-And-In-Each does not allow the shedding of blood, even of the most evil enemies. But all tribes have forgotten this primary requirement. Now there is war everywhere.»

«How did men live before? How did they show their courage and skill if not by fighting? I don't understand!»

«You need to understand that by killing an enemy, you kill a part of the life that only the Great Mystery controls. All life belongs to it. By killing an enemy, you destroy a part of the Great Mystery. By killing, you generate the force of destruction. If you dig a hole in the ground, it will be filled with air, or rain might fill it… But the dug-up earth you place where the air that fills the hole was… One thing always takes the place of another. Against every

force there is always an equal force. What you spew out of yourself with hatred creates a void within you, which is immediately filled by another force, equal to your hatred. But the force you released must also return to you, for it is an inseparable part of you. Then you have too much of this force. It begins to kill you, sets up dangerous situations, or sends illnesses… Spilled blood is full of destructive force. If you are strong enough and do not yield, this force transfers to your relatives.»

Strange Bear felt an icy shudder throughout his body. Red Elk's words were destroying the foundations of the life of a real man, a warrior, a hunter. If the Lakota lived as Red Elk suggested, they would never have become the people whom all enemies always feared. Strange Bear looked bewilderedly, now in front of him, now upwards, where the smoke from the fire rose. This strong and always self-confident man now seemed like a helpless infant, thrown under the feet of war horses. He was not ready for such a perspective. He did not want to know this side of life.

Red Elk slowly took out a pipe, wrapped in scraps of white buffalo hide, and began to fill it.

«I know you cannot immediately agree with what you have heard, so I will not say more. We will smoke, and then you will go,» said the old man.

Strange Bear was silent.

«I raise this pipe to the Only Beautiful One,» Red Elk began to chant in a monotone, holding the pipe with one end against his chest, the other pointing upwards. «I smoke this pipe with the Great Father and the Great Spirit. May there be a blue, fair day on earth. May there be less blood, less sorrow. I offer this smoke to the Great Mystery and pray for all people. May their hearts not harden when difficult times come. I accept from you, Creator, both pain and joy with gratitude. I direct this pipe to the dawning day, the embodiment of ever-renewing life…»

THE STONE YOUTH

In a time long, long ago, in the midst of boundless dark-green forests that fluffed up the steep mountain slopes, four brothers lived apart from other people. Rumors of their astonishing friendship and devotion reached the most distant tribes, and neither overflowing, marshy swamps nor scorching desert sands could stop the spread of the fame of the four brothers.

Trembling, white-haired sages would rise daily before the blazing fire and, in senile tenderness, would tell stories of the amazing foreigners. The young men gathered around the fire nodded their heads, but in their hearts smoldered envy for the four brothers from an unknown land, who were renowned as excellent hunters and yet were not ashamed to do women's work.

One day, the eldest brother, while gathering firewood, got a splinter in his toe. The insignificant wound did not bother him at first, but after some time, the toe began to swell and became as huge as a head. He lanced the terrible abscess with his hunting knife, and a whole river of brown slime flowed out. Spreading at the foot of a sheer cliff, this liquid turned into a foul-smelling swamp. Peering into the open wound, the hunter discovered something strange inside.

He brought his find home. After washing it, the brothers discovered they were holding a tiny girl.

Soon she grew into a beautiful young woman. None more beautiful could be found in all the world. She took on all the women's work, cooked food for the men, and dressed hides so well that they became white and soft. The clothes sewn by her hands were always comfortable to wear and had picturesque patterns made with dyed porcupine quills.

Many young men came to woo her, but she refused them all, firmly resolved to dedicate her life to the four kind men who considered her their sister.

But one day, they disappeared after going hunting. The girl mourned them for a long time, finding no reason for their disappearance: she did not

believe that anyone could harm such kind people.

One day she decided to go to a high mountain to receive a vision and through it learn the fate of her beloved brothers. She fasted for a whole month. The tall trunks of red pines rose around her like a wall, protecting her from the scorching wind. The silvery babbling of streams cooled her deep sorrow. And then, when the girl's soul had calmed, a prophetic dream came to her. She saw a huge beast with the body of a bull and the wings of an eagle.

«All four of your brothers have been captured by stone, therefore only stone can free them,» said the unknown beast and disappeared, leaping over the sparkling snowy mountain peaks.

The girl woke and sat for a long time in silence, not understanding what to do. She immediately thought that the strange beast was speaking of the Living Stone — the deity that lived in stones and rocks. The Stone's influence spread over the entire space of the world. How could she contend with the Stone when it was the Father of everything?

The Lakota had worshiped stones, large and small, since ancient times, and many men took them as helpers. They looked with particular respect upon small, round white stones, because somewhere among them lay the son of the Living Stone, whom the evil spirit Iya had stolen from the Living Stone and cast far away, as he was terribly afraid of him.

The place where the unfortunate girl found herself was completely covered with small pebbles. During her long fast, as she sat motionless on the ground, a smooth white pebble had managed to enter her womb. She did not notice it at first.

Descending from the mountain, she went to a shaman and revealed her vision to him.

«The giant beast was not speaking of the mighty and eldest of all gods, but of Iya. The great deity of evil, Iya, originated from the Living Stone, Inyan, and the Water Monster, Unktehi. It is he who has captured your beloved brothers,» the shaman explained. «Now you will bear a son and name him Stone.»

«How can I have a child when I have not lain with any man?» she asked in surprise.

«The White Stone, son of the Living Stone, has fertilized you so that a mighty man may come into the world.»

The girl gave birth, and her boy was as strong as a real stone. She

named him the Stone Youth. She taught him all the games and songs, told him all about the properties of roots and herbs, about animals and birds. When he grew up, she told him the story of his strange birth and the disappearance of her kind brothers.

«Your sorrow will pass when I return your brothers to you,» he declared.

And so, the Stone Youth set out on his journey. He performed many great deeds along the way, but to tell of them all would take more than a lifetime.

Reaching a terrible valley where it seemed even light lacked the strength to illuminate the gloomy gorges and caves with its rays, the Stone Youth stopped and began to challenge the evil Iya to battle.

«Who are you, that you dare to threaten me?» exclaimed Iya, and at his mighty voice the rocks shook and many giant pines were uprooted.

He began to brandish his club, but could not cause the slightest harm to the youth.

«Stop swinging your weapon in vain. You will not be able to overcome me, because I was born of that very stone you feared so much and threw away... I am your master!» The Stone Youth grabbed the trembling villain and stepped on his foot. Iya's foot was flattened and became like a piece of dried skin.

«Have mercy on me, and I will tell you everything!» cried Iya.

The Stone Youth sat down opposite the sorcerer and listened to him.

«In ancient times, I found this valley. There was plenty of game here. The deer, elk, and bears here were enormous, and hunters tried very hard to get such prey. Greed and self-love drove hunters deep into the wilderness, where they fell into my hands. I flattened them with a stone, turned them into pieces of skin, and covered my dwelling with these flattened people. The people did not die in the process, but suffered greatly... Many times I heard of the four brothers who were very kind, harmed no one, and even did women's work. I wanted to cause trouble for them, but didn't know what to latch onto, for they were good. I could not punish them without a reason, such is the law of the Creator: evil punishes those who cross the boundary of balanced existence. So I decided to plant a woman among them, so that they might somehow transgress. I went to my daughter, the Snake Tree, and broke off a small piece from her. I threw this piece near the tipi of the four brothers, and one of them got a splinter in his foot from this twig. From the splinter, a woman appeared,

whom they all came to love deeply. This love disturbed their spiritual balance. They came to love the woman more than life itself, were ready to do anything for her. They forgot that one must serve the Great Mystery, not people, because no matter how beautiful people are, they are only a part of the Great Mystery, its creations… And so, all four brothers were now in my power. One day they went hunting to get the hide of a giant deer that lived in my valley for their mysterious sister. The brothers no longer wanted to be content with what was nearby, and this was their undoing. I caught all four and rolled them out with a stone, making new pieces of skin from them to cover my tent.»

«How can they be restored to their former selves?» the Stone Youth demanded.

«You must chop down the Snake Tree, make a fire from it inside my dwelling, and place many stones on this fire. Since all stones are a particle of the Living Stone, they contain life force. When the stones are hot, pour water on them, and the steam will rise to the leather covering of my house. The steam will soak the flattened people, and they will swell up and become normal again.»

The Stone Youth did just that, and many tribes who had once, in one way or another, broken the laws of the Great Mystery and fallen into Iya's hands were returned to life. Now they faced a new life to correct their mistakes.

People do not like this story, because they cannot understand what is wrong with a hunter striving to be better than others, a warrior trying to show his courage and strength in battle to distinguish himself, a woman wanting to be more beautiful than others… People do not understand how simple human love can make us cross the boundaries of what is permitted…» Red Elk fell silent, wearily lowered his chin to his chest, and took a deep breath.

It was the second day that Bear had spent in the old man's tent, listening to his words and wondering what he was to do now that he had heard things he had never even suspected before. His mind was in turmoil. Who would tell him how to emerge from this state? Red Elk was dying, his strength was failing, and Bear understood that he had come to the old man far too late.

«Long ago, the Creator commanded us to honor life and never place one part of it above another. If we love a woman, we must see the Great

Mystery in her first and foremost. If we love children, we must love the Great Mystery in them. Our parents, whom it is customary to honor, and all the elders of the tribe are a manifestation of the Great Mystery. Their knowledge and wisdom are the Great Mystery, not their own merit.»

«But how can that be?» Bear waved his hands agitatedly, as if trying to feel for something to lean on. «So, all my exploits are not exploits at all? All my merits mean nothing?»

«And what are they without the Great Mystery? Did not the Creator breathe life into you? Did He not give you the ability to emerge victorious from battles?»

«And my enemies? Our Heavenly Father gave them life too, but they perished in battle with me.»

«They were too proud, too full of hatred, too confident in their own strength. They, like you, thought they had power. But there is no power in people. Power belongs only to the Invisible Father; it is He who fills your body with it or takes it from you. You can do nothing without Him. He alone decides everything. People have forgotten this, they think too highly of themselves, and so they lose their power. Soon bad times will come, and all tribes will shed tears. There will be much bitterness in hearts, but nothing will change until people turn their faces to the Only-That-Is. Neither war trophies, nor exploits, nor courage will help anyone, because they are nothing. It is important that your heart carries within it the sacred feeling of the Great Mystery...» Red Elk spoke more and more quietly, his lips trembling strongly.

«Are you saying, father, that a man... that I must abandon the War Path?» Strange Bear was astonished once again.

«Try not to answer the caller's summons when he gathers men for a raid to avenge someone's death. It will seem very difficult to you, but a true warrior must master his desires. And the thirst for military victories is your strongest desire,» Red Elk uttered in a very quiet voice.

«But how?»

«Try... Remember that life is not given to us to destroy it. Fight when you are attacked, defend yourself, but do not lie in wait for anyone yourself... What more can I tell you, when I have no time left?.. My body is exhausted... I am leaving...»

The old man lowered his dark, wrinkled eyelids.

AKICITA NAZHIN

His Story as translated by Winthrop Haley

I remember, I remember well, how Red Elk died. He was considered a holy man among our people. The women wept. Many men took part in burying Red Elk. Several times I saw Strange Bear near his grave, although he was not a relative. He sat motionless, his head lowered to his chest. His hair hung down like this (he indicates with his hands down his chest to his waist); he did not braid it, as if he were in deep mourning. He had always seemed difficult to understand, and after Red Elk's death, he became completely strange.

That winter, it seems, the Lakota had clashes with both the Arikaras and the Pawnees; our enemies were acting together against us then. I remember a big fight where they lost two of their chiefs at once. There was a fierce battle at Ash Creek. We fought the Wolves right on the ice; horses kept falling and had difficulty getting back on their feet because their hooves slid. It was freezing, and the blood didn't have time to flow from the wounds and immediately turned to ice. The enemies retreated. But when we were returning to camp, two of our Pipe Keepers fell behind the party and were killed.

That was a glorious time, a time of great deeds, the time of my youth.

When the snow melted, we clashed with the Wolves many times again. Once we attacked their village where they grew corn and trampled everything we could. We hated the Pawnees very much. Later we came to hate them even more because they started serving the Pale-faced soldiers, whom we called Long Knives for their sabers.

One summer we made camp on Lightning Rise Creek. It was a good place, very beautiful. Many poplars grew there, and our horses liked to strip their bark.

The young men were planning a war party against the Wolves. They went to Strange Bear with gifts and asked him to lead the party, but he refused. I don't know why he refused. He had lived in our camp only a few

days when he suddenly told his wife to take down the tipi and prepare to move. He didn't say where he had decided to go, but we had all become accustomed to him leaving us suddenly. Our relatives from other villages said he talked a great deal with shamans. That summer, I did not see him in our war parties.

And the following winter, the camp led by Paints-His-Chin-Red was attacked by Wolves. It was a very small camp of Oglalas. Many men were out hunting when the enemy appeared. Paints-His-Chin-Red and some others were killed. These Wolf-Pawnees had come out for a winter buffalo hunt and would never have dared to raid a large village, as this was not a war party. They simply wanted to avenge their summer losses. They took many women captive and rode away. They even interrupted their hunt, fearing Lakota revenge. I was among those who followed their trail. We found the frames of their lodges and a great many buffalo hides and meat: the Pawnees had abandoned everything, hurrying to get away from our land.

After this, the nephew of the slain Paints-His-Chin-Red went with the pipe to several bands and gathered a party to go and deal with the Wolves. I joined.

We raided their village and drove off a large number of horses. But it happened that on the return journey, as we traveled through the Sand Hills, we found no game at all, and we slaughtered and ate most of the captured horses.

I remember that time well, though it lies in the distant past now. I was young. I had two beautiful wives, and they knew how to cook very well and sewed wonderful clothes. I was brave, like most men of our tribe, I was confident. Today, there is no strength left in my hands, and my skin is wrinkled like a rotten fruit. But when I remember my youth, I smile and my shoulders straighten.

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

After Red Elk's death, a kind of deafness came over me for a time. I felt as if I had fallen ill. No, I did not become deaf; my hearing remained sharp. But the invisible world became unreachable to me. I could not hear voices from the Ghost Country. I fasted and spent in prayer almost all the time I had apart from hunting, but the spirits were silent. A heavy stone lay on my heart. It was as if I had lost the ground under my feet. I could find no peace.

Once I went with my wife to the camp where Paints-His-Chin-Red was the leader. Among his people, I had heard, was a very strong *Wičháša Wakȟáŋ* named Stumping Feet. I wanted to speak with him. I was in dire need of help.

Stumping Feet arranged a purification ceremony using tobacco traps. He invited me to participate. There were four of us, and we sat in a circle, holding small leather pouches that were connected by a common rope of horsehair. Stumping Feet picked up a rattle and a rasp and began to walk around us from the outside. He would stop behind each seated person and sing sacred words. At that time, the person behind whom Stumping Feet was dancing had to make every effort to gather his bodily pain and spiritual discomfort and throw them into his pouch along with a pinch of tobacco. Many spirits love tobacco, not only evil ones, but the evil spirits are afraid of the sound of the rasp and rattle, so they ran from the noise and hid where the tobacco smell was. Stumping Feet would immediately tighten the tobacco trap and, stamping his feet, move on. After going around everyone, he began to move away from us, moving in a spiral and pulling the rope with the pouches containing the spirits that had escaped from the human bodies and been captured. Stumping Feet moved a considerable distance from us and hung the tobacco traps on the branches of a tree. A *Wičháša Wakȟáŋ* knows how to deal with demons because all the powers of *Wakȟáŋ Tȟáŋka*, our Heavenly Father, help him.

This was on the day we arrived in Paints-His-Chin-Red's village. Walking Fox was supposed to set up the tipi by the time I returned from the ceremony, for which we had gone quite a distance from the camp.

On the way back, we heard distant cries and so quickened our pace. It turned out that Wolves had attacked our lodges. Quite a few of our people had been killed. Among the dead lay Paints-His-Chin-Red. It was a bad day. Many men had gone hunting, and there was no one to protect the women and children. The Wolves took many women with them. Among them was Walking Fox.

Yes, that was a bad day. I felt deceived. My former lightness of heart had returned to me, but I had lost my beloved wife. How I wanted to set off in pursuit immediately! But Stumping Feet approached and sternly said something I only understood many years later.

«Do not rush to take revenge on the enemies. Be patient. Today only those who were destined to die have perished,» that is what he said, and I was surprised by such words. «Paints-His-Chin-Red was too confident in his own strength and in the invincibility of his warriors. Now they are bleeding out.»

He told me to stay in his lodge, and I obeyed. My mind was in complete confusion: the warrior spirit, sleeping in me for so long, had awakened again, and I was ready to grapple with any strong and fierce enemy, but something emanated from within Stumping Feet that made me suddenly understand that something very important for me was about to happen.

Stumping Feet sat me down opposite him and handed me a lit pipe. He said it contained not ordinary tobacco mixed with willow bark, but a completely different herb. It was a gift from a wandering elder who, in the days of Stumping Feet's youth, had come to our lands from the south, from the country of a people who make their dwellings from clay and stack them one on top of another near sheer cliffs. Before this, I had once participated in a Peyote ceremony conducted by Ponca Indians who had come to make peace with us. Each of them had brought a small bundle containing the sacred fruits. Those people wore yellow woodpecker feathers in their hair. They put the fruits in a vessel with hot water and drank the infusion. Soon after drinking even a single sip, anyone would begin to have visions. But Stumping Feet handed me a pipe for smoking.

After a few puffs, I saw the interior space of the tipi part, and then it became huge, like the sky. The boundaries of the lodge in which I was

sitting disappeared. Stumping Feet vanished. I heard distant voices repeating my name. I rose and went towards their call.

All around, as far as the eye could see, stretched a snowy desert. The sky hung low and was very dark. Bright streaks of lightning ran from earth to sky and from sky to earth every now and then, but no sound of thunder was heard. Suddenly, I heard soft singing. The snow in front of me shot up like a fountain, and in its flakes appeared a dancing, decrepit old man. The old man began to whirl before me, and his cloak of soft white leather rose from the circular motion parallel to the ground and turned into feathers. The words of the song repeated:

People will not understand, people will not understand.
They are gripped by sleep.
You walk the Path of the Heart.
Do not look at others,
Because people will not understand.

Sometimes the dancer's face would stop and stare intently at me, but his body continued to spin. It was a terrifying sight. Several times I noticed how his facial features changed and he came to resemble now Red Elk, now Stumping Feet, now some other Lakota I knew. Suddenly, seven tall, straight trees grew around us. They had no branches at all, but at the very tops, thin twigs formed something like a spherical headdress.

The dancer suddenly stopped, and his cloak coiled up like a whirlpool but did not freeze; it continued its movement and, like a tornado, rushed on, striking each tree. And the seven trees turned into seven giants. They were completely naked, but I could not tell if they were men or women.

At that moment, the old man squatted down and became tiny, like a dwarf, even smaller. But his body was not misshapen, but perfectly proportioned.

«This body is yours. Look closer!» exclaimed the old man.

«And this is your own spirit!» He gestured around himself, pointing at the giants.

Then arrows flew at him from all sides and stuck into his arms, legs, and back. I felt the pain of the sharp points hitting. The next moment, my bones and joints cracked. Something was pressing on me and tearing me apart at the same time.

«The body will always suffer. It is too small, it is insignificant compared to what surrounds it. It must die. But your spirit is eternal, because it is the

breath of the Creator. Remember: whatever you do for your body, however you adorn it, however you please it, it will lose all that. However strong it is, however many deeds it performs, it will still turn to dust.»

At that instant, I seemed to rise upward and saw below me many burial scaffolds on which human bones rested. They filled all the space from horizon to horizon. And the sky consisted entirely of faces that were impossible to memorize or discern. They flowed into one another, they swam towards me and turned into huge eyes, they seethed like storm clouds. It seemed to me that they were all one — a single face — but there were many of them.

After that, I saw a wide road stretching straight through sharp cliffs towards the sun shining ahead, and all around were numerous narrow, winding paths that tangled with each other. On the wide road, I made out a line of people and flew closer to them. They walked unhurriedly, and each one walking in front was slightly older than the one behind. As soon as one of them took a step, he merged with the figure of the one ahead and became him. And so they moved, flowing into one another. I peered at them and understood that they were all me.

Then a snowy wind blew and obscured my eyes. When it retreated, I was on the ground before a fire, and the walls of the lodge surrounded me.

Stumping Feet sat before me, examining me very attentively.

«Now you must sleep,» he ordered me. «Your wife is gone; no one is waiting for you today. Stay and rest in my lodge. Tomorrow we will talk seriously. I see that you have true eyes…»

That is what he said to me.

THE MEETING

A Pawnee Indian bargained with Jack-Dog for an old flintlock rifle and some gunpowder, giving him a young woman in exchange. The Pawnee was utterly terrified and exhausted; his skin was stretched taut over his dried-up face, his cheekbones stuck out like two bumps, and his eyes shone with a mad gleam. He said half his village had died from a terrible sickness.

The woman was his captive. He had brought her back in the winter from a raid on a Lakota camp and had wanted to make her his wife.

«But she said her husband is a shaman. And when the sickness came to our village and our people started turning black and dying one after another, I understood that my captive's husband had sent death upon us. I don't want this woman anymore.»

«Of course, of course,» Jack nodded, examining the Indian woman. She was undeniably beautiful but terribly thin. Her eyes looked as if the world around her was too confining and a deadly sorrow was gnawing at her heart.

Jack went to the trading post and bought the woman a scarlet blanket with a wide white border and a length of woolen cloth.

«Your old blanket needs to be burned,» he told her, pulling the tattered little blanket from her shoulders. «Your dress needs to be destroyed too. Here is material for you to sew a new one. Understand? Sickness might be sleeping in your clothes, the sickness that killed the Wolf tribe…»

A semblance of joy lit up in the woman's eyes when she heard her native tongue. She nodded her head hurriedly.

«What should we call you?»

«Walking Fox,» she replied.

«You'll come with me, do the cooking and all sorts of things…»

«Are you making me your wife?» Walking Fox leaned forward and peered into the trapper's bearded face. He grunted and scratched his forehead with his fingers.

«No, I've lost all my wives. The Great Spirit doesn't wish for me to have a wife. You'll help us on the trail, and then we'll see how things go…»

Randal Scott nearly fell over when he saw the woman on the appaloosa horse following Jack.

«So you've decided to get yourself a family in your old age after all, friend? Missing a bit of home comfort?»

«There's nothing wrong with that. But I'm afraid your thoughts have taken the wrong trail this time, old-timer. Though, why hide it, she's a sweet girl… The redskins have been getting restless. She's an Oglala. Since we're heading into Lakota country, such a companion won't hurt us…»

They moved slowly deeper into the country, intending to join Joe Meek's hunting party and, with them, reach the Green River, where the next Rendezvous was to be held. It was a fine place for trappers to gather: forest, good water, plenty of grass for the horses, and, naturally, an abundance of game.

Randal Scott, much to his own surprise, felt quite at home among the free trappers; he had adapted to them easily and didn't miss city comforts. Three times he had gone back to St. Louis and spent a month and a half there each time, and, to his greatest astonishment, had never once sat down at a card table. But from time to time, when someone started talking about gold, the old craving for money would awaken deep within him, raising its head like a snake. At such moments, Scott was ready to rush off immediately to wherever someone had supposedly found gold dust.

«Forget about it,» Jack-Dog would wave his hands. «I've known many men who scoured the Indian lands looking for gold, shouting at the top of their lungs that it was everywhere. But I swear on my last teeth, I never saw anyone get rich from that gold. Some used to pan a little in the streams, but I tell you firmly: my gold is the fur-bearing animal.»

«But I'm sure there's gold in the Black Hills,» Scott would argue. «It's no accident the redskins consider them sacred. Surely under some dirty, ugly rock there's a vein so rich it's scary to think about it…»

«The Black Hills are full of ghosts, not gold. White men have no place there. I once spent the night in a canyon there I'd been warned about, but I didn't listen, and all night long first there was someone laughing, and then ghosts were clapping their hands and scaring my horses…»

«Leave those fairy tales, Jack,» Randal would grimace. «One day I'll find a vein there, or I'm not myself…»

Such chatter filled the days, carrying into the unreachable past the lazy rays of the magnificent setting sun, the tense nighttime silence, and the

coolness of the fresh morning grass.

All around, mighty pine-covered cliffs piled up, bushes with wild berries bristled with green branches, streams roared, and the shadows of clouds drifted across the slopes of the hills.

One day at noon, while they were taking a break, Randal caught a vague movement in the bushes to his right out of the corner of his eye. Jack-Dog and Walking Fox looked there too but didn't move. Something was happening in the thick green shade of the forest. Something was drawing Randal's attention.

«We'll sit tight here,» said Jack, seeing Randal reach for his lightweight Hall rifle. «Don't go sticking your nose in there. We just need to be more careful, who knows what's there…»

But Randal couldn't resist and cautiously moved towards the indistinct sounds, as if hypnotized. He held the carbine in his hands, ready to fire at any second.

«I'm not planning on rushing to save your hide if you start yelling for help, damn me if I do!» Jack shouted after him and spat a stream of chewed tobacco.

Randal tried to step on the tall grass as softly as possible, so as not to drown out the sound that had attracted him with his footsteps. Ghostly sunbeams slid from leaf to leaf on all sides; the air between the trees was pierced by yellow rays that seemed to be intently watching every movement of the creeping man.

Now breathing was clearly audible ahead. Someone was fighting fiercely just a few steps from Randal; he even heard the clang of metal — the sound of knife striking knife — but he saw no one.

And then, about ten paces away, a savage in war paint emerged from behind the bushes. He wore a long breechcloth, and on his head was a tall headdress of eagle feathers, fitted tightly together to form a sort of crown. His arms and legs shone with greasy yellow and red paint. His eyes glittered.

«Blackfoot!» Randal cried out and raised the carbine to his shoulder.

The Indian had appeared suddenly, and his warlike intentions left no room for doubt: he held a tomahawk in one raised hand, gripping a long knife in the other.

Randal crouched and fired. With some strange kind of vision, he saw the bullet tear a chunk of flesh from the savage's back after piercing his

chest. Blood spattered onto the delicate foliage swaying behind him.

«I killed him!» Randal shouted at the top of his lungs, as the Indian collapsed into the grass.

«What is it?» Jack-Dog was running, forgetting all caution, pushing aside foliage with his beloved Lefaucheux double-barreled shotgun.

«I killed him…» Randal Scott's heavy, loud breathing was like the echoes of a terrible storm. «A Blackfoot… He rushed at me with a hatchet.»

«Now that's a trick! The cunning bastard was waiting for you here!»

«I don't know what he was doing here, but I heard his panting. He was breathing too loudly to be hiding from anyone…»

Suddenly the grass rustled and parted, and from the tall stalks rose the figure of a man stripped to the waist, with long braids.

«That's not a Blackfoot,» Jack stated with certainty, keeping the savage in his sights. «That's a Sioux…»

«But that's not the one I killed!» exclaimed Randal, grabbing for his pistol.

The Indian said something, breathing heavily and wiping his left side, where blood was oozing, with his hand. The gaze from his firm eyes struck Randal with its strength.

«He says you saved him!» Jack said in surprise. «He wants to know your name…»

At that moment, a cry came from behind them. Walking Fox slipped between the trappers to the savage and began hugging him, joyfully lamenting.

«She says that's her husband,» Jack-Dog translated in amazement.

«Where did he come from?» Randal didn't understand anything.

«He was fighting that very Blackfoot you dropped. He was wounded and was almost losing the fight when you put a bullet in that fellow… Looks like you saved his life, old-timer… Hell if I know… Our squaw turns out to be his lawful wife… Who would have thought life had such twists… I swear, nothing like this has ever happened to me. You asked what we needed this squaw for, and well, it turns out, this is why: we were supposed to bring her to her lawful husband, or I don't understand a damn thing about life…»

The Indian looked at Randal very intently and suddenly spoke.

«He claims he's seen you before,» translated Jack, clearly unsure if he'd understood the redskin correctly. «Where? When did you meet?»

«I don’t know him,» replied Randal, leaning on his carbine. «We haven’t played poker together or drunk whiskey…»

«He says he once took a magic shield from you.»

«I never had a shield.» Randal just shrugged. «The fellow must be a bit crazy from joy…»

The Indian spoke very fast, gesticulating fiercely. He was quite agitated and had completely forgotten about the blood flowing from him.

«His war party attacked you once. There was another man with you, whom they killed. You were like, riding in a wagon. He wanted to shoot an arrow at you, but some invisible spirit forbade him from doing it. At the time he didn’t understand the reason, but now the truth has been revealed to him.»

Randal gaped and stood silent for a minute, then squatted down, stunned by what he had heard.

«The trail of every life has its own pattern. You were destined to meet here, you were meant to save this savage, which is why he was strictly forbidden to kill you that time, otherwise you wouldn’t be here today and no one could have helped him.» Jack-Dog slapped his neck, squashing a pesky mosquito, and sighed loudly. «I must confess, this story isn’t so simple. I’ve run into people who’ve had prophetic dreams many times, but nothing like this has ever happened to me. It’s as strange as if a shot arrow flew back and hit the one who shot it.»

«I wouldn’t have believed it myself,» Randal replied, «but nobody’s asking whether I believe it or not.»

RANDAL SCOTT

From the Diary

Today is May 20, 1837, Saturday.

An amazing, simply incredible turn of events. How fortunate that I happened to have a pencil in my bag. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to record what happened. I would have had to wait until we reached a trading post.

I don't even know where to begin, as so many years have passed since I parted with this notebook. After that fierce savage tore it from my hands, I didn't keep any records at all. It just never occurred to me. And now, by the will of fate (there's no other name for it), my diary is back in my hands.

So: completely by accident, I saved an Indian's life, without intending to at all, and he turned out to be the very savage who took this notebook from me.

Here's how it happened. I saw a redskin from the Blackfoot tribe who suddenly emerged from the grass with a hatchet in his hand. His behavior left no doubt about his warlike mood. I shot him. A little later, a Sioux Indian, bleeding, rose from the grass. It turned out these two had been fighting, so the Blackfoot had raised his hatchet not at me, but at the Sioux, to deliver a fatal blow. That's when I put lead into him.

My astonishment knew no bounds when the Sioux I saved said he remembered me well, that he had wanted to kill me, but some invisible being had forbidden him from doing so. He described the scene of the attack on the wagon in detail. He explained that during that fight he couldn't understand why he had to spare my life, but now everything was perfectly clear to him. If he had killed me, no one would have rescued him at the moment when the enemy's weapon was ready to smash his skull.

Now I know why I didn't die along with Keith Malbraid, though I cannot grasp it with my reason. I would never have believed anyone who told me such a story, even if they swore to its truthfulness by all that's holy. I would have called it all nonsense if I weren't a direct participant in these events.

I remember perfectly well how that savage in the bear mask was about to shoot me. Nothing was stopping him; the bow was drawn, the arrow aimed straight at my heart. But he didn't release it. I saw him as if listening to someone. And he even shouted at his tribesmen, driving them away from me. This is no longer just a coincidence.

I confess I never prayed. I confess I did not believe in God. It seems that even now I do not comprehend what God is, although fate has presented me with undeniable proofs of His will.

The Indian I saved (it's still unclear who saved whom) returned this notebook to me. It was wrapped in deerskin and carefully preserved. He explained that he had mistaken it for a powerful shield or talisman when he rode up to the looted wagon at night and saw me holding the notebook in front of me. Right now he is sitting opposite me, watching with great attention as I write. The letters clearly interest him.

This Indian is called Mato, which means Bear. And here is another incredible detail: the young Sioux woman traveling with us, whom my companion Jack, nicknamed Dog, had traded for with a Pawnee Indian, turned out to be this very Bear's wife!

May 25, 1837, Thursday

We are still living in Bear's tipi. We are constantly invited as guests, fed heartily. Everyone is eager to see me because for them I am not just a man, but some kind of *Wakȟáŋ*. They always exclaim this word loudly, shake their heads, and cover their mouths in astonishment. Jack-Dog explained to me that they associate me with powerful spirits from the other world. He himself is very pleased with the reception we have received.

The tribe lives a well-fed life. They have many horses. On the day of our arrival in the village, Bear held a big reception in his lodge and gave many horses to some people. Jack explained that it is their custom on festive days to make such gifts to those considered poor.

For the first few nights, Bear regularly had sex with his wife, for whom, as I understand, he missed greatly. These couplings always upset me, as the guest beds are in immediate proximity to the host's. I remain agitated for a long time and cannot sleep, even after their breathing and panting has subsided. And what's so surprising? Jack and I wander the prairies and mountains for five or six months at a time. The opportunity to be with a woman arises very rarely. Bear has no other wives to offer a guest, as some particularly generous savages do as a sign of hospitality.

Friday, June 2, 1837

Once again, I was struck by the presence of death. In the city, human grief never stands out so glaringly; it hides behind the walls of houses, and crowds of laughing people obscure those who weep. Here, everything is as plain as day.

I saw the women when they went to the burial scaffolds erected on a nearby hill. What cries came from there! Like the howling of wolves. I can't imagine how long ago most of the dead were placed there or if there are any fresh burials, but the mourners seemed inconsolable, as if they had lost a relative just yesterday.

I examined the cemetery from a distance, as no one from a foreign people is allowed to approach the burials, so as not to anger the spirit of the dead. No matter how often we are in Indian villages, I never break this rule. Hair sways in the wind on many of the poles. At first I thought they were scalps, but it turned out these are locks cut by the relatives themselves as a sign of mourning. Around the scaffolds, the scattered bones of small animals are visible everywhere — traces of funeral feasts, which are often held in memory of the deceased.

In general, all Indian cemeteries resemble each other, just like the cemeteries of white people, for that matter.

Saturday, June 3, 1837

This morning, a group of men returned. They brought something in a leather bundle and performed some rituals over it. Then they built a new platform on four poles at the cemetery and placed this bundle on it, laying a large war club, a quiver of arrows, a bow, and a round shield beside it. The bundle was too small to contain a body, so I went to Jack for an explanation.

He asked around and told me a very strange story.

An Indian named He-Smells-the-Buffalo went to retrieve the body of his deceased son, who had been left lying somewhere on the territory of the Psaloka tribe after a battle. When he found the corpse a few days later, he realized he couldn't bring the body back with him, as decomposition was already advanced. So, he and his friends took hold of the rotting remains and began scraping the flesh from the bones with knives. A task, I imagine, far from pleasant. When the bones were clean, He-Smells-the-Buffalo wrapped them in a deerskin and brought them to the camp.

It seems that for the savages, it is not so much the body of the deceased that is important, but the bones. Jack claims he knew several redskins who always carried the bones of their deceased ancestors with them. However, in most cases, the bones are buried in the ground after the body has decomposed on the burial scaffold.

Monday, June 5, 1837

Today, a clash with the Crows occurred near the village. They had probably come to steal horses from the Oglalas. But they were discovered. Five of them were killed. The rest galloped away. On the Oglala side, Mountain Top was killed.

I wanted to take part in the fight, but didn't have time, as everything happened very quickly. And Jack-Dog held me back by the elbow, insisting I watch this spectacle from the sidelines. However, from the side, all one could see was the Indians racing about on their ponies, raising thick dust, and shooting at something on the ground.

When Mountain Top was brought to the village, a crowd of women instantly gathered around. A terrible wailing began. The deceased was prepared for the farewell, dressed in a festive shirt made of amazingly soft-tanned leather. It was embroidered very brightly and beautifully. His face was smeared with scarlet paint, and a black handprint was also left, which seemed to cover the dead man's mouth: four fingers left their mark on one cheek, and the thumb on the other. They say this mark is used to distinguish a particularly respected and brave warrior.

FAMILY

The vast majority of trappers in those days married Indian girls, as there were no white women to speak of in those wild parts. The arrival of even the most plain-looking white woman would have caused a much greater stir among the bearded inhabitants of the mountains and prairies than the appearance of a whole herd of white buffalo. To drown in the embrace of a fair-skinned prostitute, trappers would travel all the way to distant St. Louis.

Yes, a white woman was a rare sight on the western bank of the Missouri. However, serious quarrels also broke out among trappers over red-skinned beauties, for love knows no bounds; it strives to manifest itself and shower everyone around with its heat, even if such passion brought death in its wake. Randall Scott well remembered how two years ago, during the Rendezvous, Kit Carson had a shootout with a Frenchman named Chouinard. And the reason for it was Wa-Nibe, a very young girl from the Arapaho tribe. She looked so alluring that her mere presence could make men's heads spin from ten paces away. Both Chouinard and Carson had noticed her during the festive Soup Dance, and each believed she had chosen him.

The Soup Dance was considered a courtship dance. The girls would line up opposite the men, holding black spoons made from buffalo horn. They would dip them into the soup from a kettle, and the dancing men were supposed to drink the soup. This was only possible if the girl desired it. If the partner did not suit her, she would throw the soup in his face. Otherwise, she would allow her chosen one to throw a blanket over her head. Thus covered, the couple could stand, talking and gently rubbing noses in full view of everyone. The white trappers quickly replaced nose-rubbing with the more familiar and pleasant kisses. The Indian girls readily accepted this innovation.

Wa-Nibe meant Singing Grass. Without exception, all the hunters stared at her when she rode through the camp on her white pony, dressed only in a soft white skirt with red embroidery, her bare breasts with their taut

nipples seductively quivering with every step of the horse. There wasn't a single man at the Rendezvous who remained calm looking at this daughter of nature, her bronze skin shining in the sun.

One time, Wa-Nibe refused the drunken Chouinard's advances and splashed soup on him, which sent the Frenchman into a rage. This huge man with heavy fists and a bull neck possessed tremendous strength. In Captain Drips' brigade, with which he had come, Chouinard had managed to break the ribs of nearly everyone. Like most beaver hunters, slow and lazy in appearance, he was capable of unleashing all his pent-up energy in a moment... This time, scalded more by the girl's contempt than by the soup thrown at him, he lunged at her, but she, defending herself, suddenly stabbed him with a knife and fled. The wound was trivial, but the Frenchman was furious.

The next day, he saw Wa-Nibe riding a beautiful pinto stallion, a gift from Kit Carson to the girl. Grabbing his rifle, he began rushing around the camp looking for Kit, whom he considered his personal offender and on whom he wanted to vent his anger. Carson rode out to meet him on his horse and approached closely. Chouinard raised his weapon, but the neck of the stallion Kit was riding was in the way, and the shot went wide. Kit easily dodged the bullet and immediately fired his pistol, shooting the drunken giant in the arm.

Randall Scott never had a shootout to win a companion. He had traveled downriver with cargo for Ashley-Henry Company a few times and in St. Louis would plunge headlong into the debauched orgies of the brothels.

«The flesh has its own appetites,» he would tell himself.

Jack-Dog just chuckled at his escapades, as he himself had long lost interest in the fair sex.

«No, my heart is like ice now, which no woman's breast can melt,» he would grunt, scratching his thick beard with both hands, «though I do feel tenderness for these creations of nature, endowed with the ability to continue life.»

One July evening at sunset, Bear brought a girl of about eighteen into the tent and sat her down next to Randall.

«He says you need a wife,» Jack translated. «This is his sister. She is called Magaju-Winna, which means Rain Woman. Last winter, soon after she married, the Crows killed her husband. She is a good girl. She needs

a husband, she needs to bear children. Bear thinks you would be a good husband for her. If I were you, I wouldn't be stubborn. You can't keep traveling downriver just for blonde mops. A normal man should have a woman by his side. This one will do just fine. Look at her eyes, imagine how pleasant it will be to touch her stomach…»

«Are you trying to persuade me?»

«You hit the nail on the head, old man!» Jack nodded vigorously with his shaggy head.

«And you yourself, I see, are in no hurry to start a family again.»

«You know… One day you'll have to take someone for more than one night. Or are you planning to go back east? Then I understand you, then you don't need a wife for damn anything. Back east, no one would appreciate such a marriage, that's as true as puddles forming on the ground when it rains.»

«I'm not planning on going anywhere, thunder strike me. But to have a woman constantly nearby… what about freedom?»

«Stop talking nonsense. You can always leave the squaw with the tribe if you decide to travel alone. Remember the others. More than half of the trappers have taken Indian women, and some of them even have a white wife back in the States somewhere…»

Randall turned to Bear, who had been silently watching the white men talk. Then Randall looked carefully at the girl sitting before him. Her eyes were downcast.

«He brought her to you, instead of discussing it in her absence,» Jack continued, «your refusal might offend this guy… Besides, use your head. He's far from a simple savage, I swear by all that's dear to me. He follows the advice of voices that you and I cannot hear. Perhaps this time, too, he knows something that others do not…»

Scott took a deep breath. He understood perfectly well that among the savages, no one gave their daughters away so easily. The courtship period always lasted a long time, sometimes five or six years. When a young man decided to propose, he would ask one of his elder relatives to speak with his beloved's parents. Sometimes, the future son-in-law would come to woo a dozen times himself, each time bringing several horses to his chosen one's father.

But the difficulties pertained, perhaps, only to the courtship period. To create a family, as the Lakota themselves liked to say, three things were

needed: a bed, a kettle for cooking meals, and an old man to bless the young couple.

Scott didn't know Bear, didn't know his temperament. He had no idea how this stern-faced redskin had acquired a wife. He hadn't the slightest notion of what motivated the Indian. But Randall Scott wanted a woman.

«Alright,» he made an affirmative gesture, «so be it.»

Bear nodded his head in satisfaction and smiled. Then he took a softly tanned buffalo robe from his shoulders and threw it over Randall and the young woman. After that, he stood up. Magaju-Winna rose as well, and they left the tipi together. Randall watched them go with surprise and glanced sideways at Jack. The latter lay back and began to hum something softly. After a while, the girl returned with her belongings and began silently arranging them to the left of the entrance.

«Now we have the women's side,» Jack laughed, barely showing his teeth through his beard. «Don't forget to give Bear a gift…»

«Magaju…» Randall said thoughtfully, looking at the bent-over girl. «I suppose I don't like that name.»

He stepped forward and squatted down beside her.

«I will call you Maggie. You are Maggie,» he pointed his finger at her and repeated the name. «Translate it for her, Jack.»

AKICITA NAZHIN

His story as translated by Winthrop Haley

When our women were with child, they strictly observed many rules that applied only to pregnant women. For instance, they always rose before sunrise and took a walk, because children in the womb grew better at that time of day. Pregnant women never let their gaze linger for long on objects or creatures that seemed strange to them, as this could adversely affect the baby.

Childbirth took place right in the home, but in special cases, when warned by a shaman, a special small tent was set up. Adult female relatives would come to assist. Sometimes they asked the shaman to sing a sacred song. He could be in the same tent, but more often he would appeal to the Great Spirit from his own tipi.

The placenta was always collected into a smoked pouch and hung on a tree outside the camp circle. It was forbidden to bury it in the ground, as that could bring death upon the newborn. The umbilical cord was also hidden in a special pouch, sewn in the shape of a turtle or a lizard. This pouch hung around the child's neck for a whole year. The baby was smeared with fat mixed with powdered buffalo dung, the rotten pith of a cottonwood tree, and puffball mushroom powder.

The child's name was most often given by the father's parents. But when Magaju gave birth to a son, Bear named him, because there were no relatives of her white husband among us. He himself was also away when his son came into the world. He often left with his friend Dog, which is why we called him Ichi-Mawani, meaning Traveling Without Family. Bear named his sister's son Hanwiyanpa Chikala — Little Moonlight, as he emerged from his mother's body when the new moon was appearing. But when Ichi-Mawani returned to the tribe, he called him Dick. While the boy was growing up, everyone called him Dick-Hanwiyanpa (Dick Moonlight).

A little later, Bear and Walking Fox had a daughter. On the night the girl was born, many heard an unknown song from the top of the mountain

at the foot of which our tents stood. I too heard that song. It was very beautiful, but had no words. No one could understand what it was about. Bear named his daughter Olowan Wakan — Sacred Song.

In our tribe, we loved children and treated them with respect. There were always more women than men, so the birth of a son in a family was a great celebration. But everyone was loved — boys and girls. Bear was happy about the arrival of his daughter. He had awaited her birth. Invisible beings with whom he constantly spoke had told him about her.

It was not our custom for children to cry; even the very young quickly learned to be quiet. When they started crying, the mother would feed them immediately. If they did not quiet down, they were placed in their cradleboard, taken out of the tipi, and hung on a tree away from the camp, where their loud voices wouldn't bother anyone and where no one paid attention to their wails. In this way, the infants quickly learned that crying was useless. There were, however, cases where such children were killed by enemies who had sneaked up to our camp. My first child was killed like that. But my wife bore me another son and two daughters.

In those distant years, our children grew up strong. We were surrounded by beautiful mountains and forests, the air was fresh. We had many horses, and both boys and girls learned to ride from a young age. Some boys received a horse as a gift from their parents when they were only five or six years old.

The children were not afraid to swim in the wildest rivers. In winter, they boldly dove into icy water. In summer, they played under the scorching sun.

Until about the age of ten, boys and girls grew up together, but as soon as the characteristics of their sex awakened in them, they separated and began preparing for the duties they would have to perform in life. The parents would announce it to the whole village when a girl had her first monthly bleeding, and people celebrated the arrival of another woman. And celebrations were always held when a boy killed his first game on a hunt, and his father would give away a horse on that occasion to someone in need. After that, the boys finally embarked on the warrior's path.

We had a beautiful life.

I remember one time I set out with my friend named Night Otter on a horse-raiding expedition. I told my wife to prepare new moccasins for me

and gathered my amulets. In the morning we rode out together, but soon a boy on a bay horse caught up with us. He had never been on a war party before and said he would definitely go with us. He was too young, and I told him to go back.

«No,» he objected, «you don't have to take me, but I will follow. I cannot just return, since I have decided to become a man.»

His name was Steals Meat, because he was clever and better than others at stealing meat from the women. Our boys often played at war, and in one such game, the women hanging meat to dry were the enemy camp from which they had to sneak a piece of meat. He was the best among them.

I agreed to take him with us.

For three days we encountered no game. I don't know what the reason was. We grew very hungry, and when we finally shot a buffalo, we immediately opened its belly and began drinking its blood, scooping it up with our hands. After that, we calmly roasted choice pieces of meat and ate them, dipping them in the buffalo's blood.

That evening, we saw a village of the Psaloka. They were feasting after a successful hunt. This made them less vigilant. I was pleased.

Settling on a mountain, I took out several dried buffalo bones and lit them, smoking my amulets with the fumes. I always used smoke from smoldering bull bones because I was told to do so in my sacred vision.

At night, we descended to our enemies' camp and easily stole twenty horses from the corral. There was a guard tent in the middle of the corral, but there was no one in it, so everything went without difficulty. But a little way from the village, we unexpectedly came upon two lovers who, I think, had met secretly from their parents and were coupling while all the relatives were feasting. I struck the man down with an arrow, and Night Otter felled the woman with his axe. Steals Meat touched each of the dead but did not want to take hair from either. I remember that many of our children disliked doing this. I saw one boy vomit when he ran onto the battlefield and began cutting the skin on the head of a fallen enemy with his knife. And he still finished his task. But Steals Meat did not scalp the enemies. He earned two coups, and that is much more important.

Yes, in those far-off times, our children were eager to become real men. They grew up strong and brave.

Those were wonderful years.

MATO WITKO

His own words

It was customary that during the Dance of Looking at the Sun (whites more often call it the Sun Dance), the dancer was supported not by those who had undergone the ceremony the previous time, but by older people. The elderly were always given preference when it came to advice and help. I am not speaking of help in battle, where agility and physical strength are needed, but of spiritual strength, for our Dance was a sacred ceremony.

I went to Mountain Finger and gave him a horse, saying that I wished to offer my body as a sacrifice and that I needed his help. Mountain Finger often acted as a mentor in this matter; many who decided to undergo self-torture turned to him. His old, wrinkled, yet very large and still strong hands inspired confidence in me. His eyes had seen much. His hands had created much. His head held much within it. Mountain Finger went to Beaver Tail and One-Horned Bull to speak with them.

That evening they invited me to them. The women left the tent for the duration of our conversation. I brought my pipe, which I had filled beforehand. One-Horned Bull accepted it and placed it to his left. After that, Mountain Finger slowly filled with tobacco a pipe that had been lying in his bag until then. We smoked it. The old men gave me preliminary instructions, especially emphasizing that I should not take any food or water for a day before the ceremony. Then they said that in the morning they would take my pipe and go to pray.

A day before the appointed time, I went far from our village to spend time alone. The Sun Dance festival itself lasts four days among us. Everyone makes merry, sings songs, holds celebrations, and feasts one another. It is a special time. Since various communities gather from all sides into one huge camp, the number of people becomes incredibly large. The people truly become a single family. Many manage to meet relatives only at such festivals. Therefore, each day of the Sun Dance is a separate celebration, very bright, lavish, and loud.

When I told Mountain Finger that I was going to fast, he gave me a bunch of sagebrush and told me to chew it before I left the village.

In those times, we conducted the ceremony of sacrifice to the Sun in a specially erected sacred tipi. This tipi was not conical like ordinary dwellings. Its walls stood vertically, and the roof converged into a cone. This lodge was covered not with hides, like an ordinary tent, but with branches, leaves, and grass. Only members of the military and religious societies were present there.

But even in those years, the dance with tortures in some communities took place in the open air, and about ten years later, all our tribes stopped setting up the lodge for the sacred dance, and all Indians could watch those who offered their flesh as a sacrifice.

The setting inside the lodge where I was to undergo torment was familiar because I had been in it every year, but I had never looked at those gathered there from the perspective of the central pole, from which long leather straps with loops at the ends hung.

I do not know if any white person can understand the feelings of a man who was about to meet the Great Spirit one-on-one and, through the Sun, send a particle of his being into the world where thousands of the animals we had consumed for food had gone. We were going to suffer in order to atone for our guilt before all whom we had ever offended, wounded, or killed.

That day, Standing Water and Moccasin-of-Rabbit-Skin were also offering their bodies as sacrifices alongside me.

They painted my face and led me to the sacred pole, which rose from the dim lodge upwards to a special opening, from where the rays of the sun standing at its zenith fell. Long leather straps, symbolizing the rays of the sun, hung from that strong pole (it was the trunk of a specially chosen slender tree). This pole represented the axis of the universe in our ceremony, around which life runs.

Mountain Finger pinched the skin on my left breast with two fingers, then on my right, and pierced it with sharpened bone awls. Blood immediately flowed. Into the pierced places, the old man inserted strong sticks, peeled of bark, and fastened the loops of the straps hanging from the pole to their ends. Then, to check if everything was secure, he tugged hard on the straps and nodded his head affirmatively.

We were all accustomed to pain, otherwise we could not have waged

war. But what I experienced during the Sun Dance, when I leaned back with my whole body and the long straps stretched the skin on my chest, was unlike anything else. The body simply refused to endure such pain. It seemed to retreat from me to the side because I stopped feeling anything. The pain was everywhere around me, billowing in a black fog. It was endless. It seemed to me that a terrible force was trying to pull my spine out through my chest. My legs refused to move; the earth was pulling my body down.

Each of us dancers had a whistle made from an eagle's wing bone in our mouths. We were supposed to whistle and sing without removing the whistle from our mouths, meaning singing only with the voice, without words. I tried to sing, but my voice disappeared. My head spun; a deafening noise rose. I saw numerous colored spots that bloomed before my eyes like magical flowers. But I was incapable of appreciating their beauty at that moment. Then I heard a loud, very loud, unknown voice sounding in my head. It was also singing. Its song was full of amazing power. It seems to me now that only this song kept me upright. It was the trunk of a tree inside me. The branches of this tree extended through my arms and forced them to rise towards the sun. Gradually, I began to repeat the words of this song and distinguished my own voice.

After the festival, I was told that I had brought a new sacred song. It began to be sung often during other Sun Dances. But I myself could not remember it that time. Only later did I hear others singing it.

Suddenly, something huge pressed on me from within, and I saw all the people gathered in the sacred lodge begin to recede — I soared above the ground. The dancers remained below with them. Among them, I saw myself. It was strange to watch what was happening around the pole, strange to find myself away from the unbearable pain and yet feel it in the body I was observing from above. I realized that I was the sun's rays at that moment. I was the voice that streamed from the heavens:

«You are a part of the Earth upon which your feet tread. Support those whose step is weak. You are a part of the Sky which breathes the fresh wind upon you, so press yourself to the lips of the weary and fill them with lightness. You are a drop of the Water which you drink. Irrigate the Earth with yourself, quench the people's thirst with yourself. Distribute your body in parts, feed with it those who are hungry, who need warmth, who lack strength. Through you flows the Great Power of Infinity, so be generous and

bestow it upon others...»

The voice fell silent, and I instantly saw the surrounding world in the way familiar to me. I was moving in a circle with the others to the deafening beat of the drums. The skin on my chest cracked loudly; blood splattered, completely covering our brightly painted bodies. Many think human skin is not very strong, but in reality, it can withstand enormous strain. I knew people who prayed to the Great Spirit while suspended for several days on straps passed through the skin of their chests; and the skin did not tear. But it is very painful.

In later times, when the Sun Dance began to be held not in the sacred tipi and there were many women among the spectators, wives, sisters, or specially selected virgins for the dance would occasionally approach the dancers. Moving alongside the bloodied dancers, they would thrust bunches of moistened healing herbs into their mouths. They danced nearby and encouraged them. Walking Fox could not approach me because at that time no outsiders were inside.

When the straps finally tore out of the skin, I almost fell, but someone caught me from behind and kept me on my feet. Mountain Finger helped me approach the central pole and seated me on a mat. A shaman stepped towards me and with a sharp knife cut away the dangling shreds of flesh from my wounds. These pieces he wrapped in deerskin and later buried somewhere in the ground. Healing herbs were applied to my chest, and it was bandaged with soft leather strips.

After that, I left the sacred tipi. Walking Fox rushed to me; I saw a question in her eyes.

«I heard the voice of He-Who-Breathes-Life-Into-Us,» I said.

Then I went away from the camp and prayed all night. My chest hurt terribly, but through this pain, I connected with the whole world that suffers. I could hear the loud singing continuing in the village, through which broke the sounds of eagle bone whistles. And in the morning, Black Dog came for me on horseback and took me back to the village.

That is how I went through my first Sun Dance. I was happy. I felt unity with the entire universe. I had sacrificed my flesh to atone for the guilt of many people, to give them the opportunity to walk peacefully on the Sacred Path of Life.

RENDEZVOUS

The Horse River flowed into the Green River halfway to the Upper Valley. In those years when the Indians and trappers were actively hunting for furs, the valley between these two small rivers was completely covered with trees and deadwood. In 1832, Captain Bonneville risked building a trading post there, which the mountain hunters called Nonsense Fort, considering the place too high and the winters there too harsh. And the small wooden fortification with clay-daubed walls soon stood empty.

It was to this abandoned structure that Jack-Dog intended to get before the others, but he tarried in the Oglala village because Scott had decided for the first time to take his wife and son to the Rendezvous. This thought came to him just before departure, and the preparations were delayed by a day. Jokingly, he suggested that Bear join them, and to everyone's surprise, he agreed. For the first two days, five other Oglalas rode with them, without asking where or why the trappers were headed. These Indians simply mounted their horses and rode after them, like dogs running after departing guests for no reason. Only when they learned that the place their friends were headed to would be swarming with Snakes, who were perpetually at war with the Lakota, did they turn back.

Bear remained. He rode in silence, peering intently at the mountains ahead. He was about to see and understand something important… He wondered how many Pale-Faces roamed this land, what they were like, were they all similar to these two?

«Close now,» Jack-Dog grinned with satisfaction and leaned back in his creaking saddle.

The space ahead was filled with forested hillsides. Riding onto the crest of the nearest one, the riders halted. Below, a strip of river glittered; beyond it stretched a green valley dotted with dark patches of brush. And further still, the silhouettes of grim bluffs shimmered in the warm blue air. Along the river stretched a long row of Indian tipis, which from a distance in the bright sunlight seemed snow-white. Bustling human figures could be distinguished. Indians and whites mingled into a single mass.

The nearest group they passed was sitting on the ground in a circle, engrossed in a game of «hand.» In the center lay a pouch of beads, a handful of bullets, a couple of hunting knives. This was for the next winner. The «it» player had to guess in which of the seated men's fists a tiny piece of wood was hidden, being passed secretly from hand to hand. Many often spent entire days at this gambling pastime.

Bear looked around warily. Everywhere wandered Indians from the Flathead, Snake, and Nez Perce tribes. Several thousand of them had gathered. Bear had never seen so many enemies at once. It was like a gathering of different Lakota communities into a common camp. The Indians were singing and dancing, splitting into small groups; laughter came from all directions. Bearded white men in dirty jackets of coarse buckskin danced side by side with naked savages. A brisk trade in goods was going on here and there. A pungent smell hung over the clearing where tanned hides and buffalo leather straps were laid out in huge quantities. Near sacks of dried meat lay bloody pieces of freshly butchered deer carcasses. Wherever one looked, women chatted cheerfully, laying out brightly embroidered moccasins on colorful blankets. Fires smoked, steam rose from soot-blackened kettles where dinner boiled.

The inhabitants of the Far West could eat endlessly. If circumstances allowed, a hunter would consume up to four kilograms of meat for supper, then sleep a couple of hours, wake up, and sit down to eat again. No one knew what a poor appetite was. The deer, antelope, elk, and bighorn sheep roaming everywhere guaranteed a hearty meal at any time of day; one just needed to know how to get close to these wary, horned beauties.

The hunters of the Rocky Mountains were men of a special breed. Tough, enduring, severe. Yet they loved that wild country with all their heart; otherwise, not one of them would have stayed to live there, surrounded by uncertainty and savages whose friendliness could turn into furious hatred at any moment. Perhaps it was this love for the free expanses and the passion for a nomadic life that made them attractive in the eyes of most newcomers, despite the hunters' ignorance and often stupidity.

«Let's set up the tipi closer to the center,» said Jack, looking at Maggie, «there's a good spot over there. And leave the entrance open, let anyone who wants come in.»

The girl nodded and looked back. On the travois, which carried all the

household belongings, sat Dick Moonlight, his little hands gripping the frame of willow rods constructed above him to protect him from a possible fall. The boy smiled, his eyes exploring every object that passed by.

«Mato,» Jack addressed Bear, «don't wander too far from us for now. Too many Snakes here. Let them get used to the fact there's a Lakota among them first, let them smoke a pipe with us by the fire, calm down.»

He nodded calmly and sat on the ground, crossing his legs.

Nearby, five Flatheads were singing piercingly, beating a drum hung with many small bells. A little further off, a group of Indians was shooting bows, competing in speed. Each tried to release as many arrows as possible before the first one hit the ground. To do this, the first arrow was shot as high as possible. The men were stripped almost naked, wearing only breechclouts so their clothes wouldn't hinder movement. Their long hair was braided and tightly tied at the back of their heads. Their brown bodies curved picturesquely as the bows were drawn; well-developed muscles bulged and gleamed in the sun when the shooter's hand lightning-fast snatched an arrow from the quiver on his back.

Bear watched them with interest, feeling the excitement of an athlete awakening in him. In such competitions, he himself had managed to release eight arrows. The winner so far was a Flathead who had released six. Passions were heating up. Newcomers wanting to show their skill approached. Some trapper also tested his strength, but amid the crowd's laughter, he laid down the bow, not managing to loose a second arrow. The women hummed their own tunes as each new participant stepped forward.

Bear rose and stepped towards the shooters, wanting to join the competition, but at that moment something happened, and the Indians raised a terrible cry. They began waving their arms and quickly split into two groups. The voices of the women were louder than the rest. Bear sat down again, deciding it was not worth approaching his enraged enemies, as they could easily turn their irritation against him. But the flared quarrel soon subsided, and the Flatheads dispersed.

Only foreign tongues reached his ears. This was a strange world where Bear understood not a word. This was a country of enemies.

When Randall, who had gone off somewhere, returned, his wife gave him food and sat beside him. Bear watched his sister intently, studying her gaze and gestures. Who was this fair-haired man to her, the one who had given life to her son, caressed her at night, brought her meat from the hunt

and beautiful blankets from those big camps of white people? It seemed she had endowed him with all the best qualities possessed by the warriors of her native tribe, although he never brought enemy scalps or went on war parties with her people. She considered him not just strong, as a true warrior was in her eyes, but much more powerful and important. He gave her dresses that other girls in the tribe couldn't even dream of. She didn't have to endlessly scrape hides to make clothes from them, although she enjoyed tanning leather to make a soft jacket and moccasins for her husband. Like all women, she set up the tent, packed for journeys, lit the fire, and always had something ready for dinner. She liked taking care of him because he was affectionate, never beat her, and talked to her a great deal, even though she still barely understood English.

Randall Scott's character had changed greatly since his first meeting with the trappers. Six years of life in a land that knew no mercy had influenced even the most stubborn habits brought from the world of civilization. Now the sight of mangled corpses no longer made Randall tremble. His clothes had absorbed the gunpowder stench of many bloody skirmishes with savages. He had learned survival in the deserted prairie and among the steep bluffs from Jack-Dog, Jim Bridger, and Joe Meek. Towards the end of his first year in the West, he had chopped trees side by with Sublette and Campbell to build Fort William. He was one of those who, with Bridger, destroyed the village of the belligerent Bannocks, after which a decrepit old woman came to the trappers to smoke a pipe, weeping that all the men of the tribe had perished. Along with the other hunters, he had doffed his hat in deepest admiration and respect when Dr. White and Dr. Spalding brought their fair-haired brides to the 1838 Rendezvous. How else could the dirty, sweat-stinking men show their respect? Someone produced an American flag and sang the anthem. The Indians, stunned by the delicate appearance of the fair-skinned strangers, held a colossal parade that day.

Randall knew how to have fun, how to be calm, how to focus all his attention when needed. But now he sat before the fire, unusually agitated. Bear had never seen him like this. Randall looked ill.

«What troubles Ichi-Mawani?» Bear asked Jack about him.

«You wouldn't understand,» Dog shrugged. «A man showed him *mazaska*. The yellow metal affects him badly, sends sickness to his heart.»

«Strange. It's just metal. It comes in little pieces and like sand, but no

evil spirit lives in it.»

«For some white people, *maza-ska* is worse than the most evil spirit.»

Bear rose and, stepping towards Randall, sat before him and looked into his eyes. The latter gave a strange jerk and suddenly froze. For a few moments, Randall stopped seeing anything around him; the noisy human chatter, the trampling of horses, and the Indian songs sank into silence. Before his eyes appeared a crudely built shed, near which dirty figures were digging in the earth, then water flashed in the sun and immediately turned red with blood.

Jack-Dog watched his friend, his mouth agape. Then Bear rose to his full height. Randall also stood up, shaking his head as if throwing something off. The Indian made a negative gesture with his hand and said firmly:

«*Hechon shni yo. Echi chiye*. Don't do it. I don't advise it.»

«*Tokhechae?* Why?» Scott was surprised and immediately turned to Jack. «And not do what? What's he talking about?»

Jack-Dog looked perplexedly at the Indian and the trapper standing facing each other and understood nothing. Something more subtle was happening than an ordinary man could perceive. Jack grunted, spat, fingered his graying beard, and began questioning Bear. Randall understood only isolated words in the animated dialogue and impatiently waited for an explanation from his comrade.

«In a word, old man, he says gold means death for you. There are things some people shouldn't even go near. Seems like for you, it's that gold. I can't explain it better, sorry…»

«Why? *Tokhechae?*» Randall turned again to the Lakota, his eyes full of hot bewilderment.

«*Tokhechinyan echanun oyakihi keyash, luhakte shni*. Do as you see fit, but you will not have it.» The Indian poked Randall in the chest with his index finger and returned to his place.

A pause hung for a while, then Randall also sat down on the ground, muttered something like «fool,» and began to finish what was left in his bowl.

In the evening, excited Snakes and Flatheads crowded before their tent. Waving their hands, which gripped war clubs and bows with arrows, the savages were calling for Bear. In the thickening dusk, they looked like a solid mass. Their eyes shone. They strutted, beat their chests, obviously

boasting of their own bravery.

Almost immediately, as soon as the noise started outside, Jack-Dog stepped out of the tipi with a rifle in his hand and demonstratively blew his nose at the feet of the gathered natives. Randall followed, frowning disapprovingly and slapping the stock of his carbine with his palm. Someone from among the trappers pushed through the Indians.

«What's the matter, friend? What's got into them?»

«Seems these fellows decided to tear our friend to pieces,» Jack muttered in reply. «He is, after all, a *Sioux*.»

Bear appeared behind them. His face seemed carved from stone; not a muscle twitched, betraying agitation. He stood motionless, his gaze fixed somewhere through the figures of the shouters, as if not seeing them. One could only guess at the feelings raging in this brave warrior who had been through dozens of battles and felled not a few dozen enemies.

«Strike me dead if I've ever seen such composure!» exclaimed the trapper who had run up. «This flint is probably too tough for the Snakes to chew… They'll burst with frustration that he's ignoring them, or call me a greenhorn in such matters!»

«Alright!» Jack raised his voice and aimed the barrels of his double-barreled gun at the savages. «You have good loud voices and well-hung tongues, you've proven that nicely. Now you can go back to your squaws and do something more useful than shaking the air in front of our home, because I don't like it. If you don't understand that, I can easily explain it in another language.»

He took a couple of steps towards the nearest Indian and pressed the barrels against his greased forehead. The man froze. Behind Jack stood Randall, the carbine stock to his shoulder, slowly moving the barrel from one redskin to another.

«This is a peaceful camp,» Jack continued, pressing the weapon slightly against his victim's forehead. «We came with a friend… He is our friend, understand? If you want to fight him, fight us too. Or did you meet our friend in battle and run away shamefully, and now want to jump him with the whole pack?»

Here Jack nimbly jumped to another Indian and pressed the gun to his throat.

«And you, Jumping Bird, didn't you fight against me before? Don't you remember how your axe broke my shoulder? But that was war. Then we

became friends. Did I come to your home in a bad mood after that? Was I angry with you?... This is a peaceful camp, and you come to our home demanding the death of our friend!... I repeat, you'll have to talk to us first...»

Those Indians who understood English hurriedly translated the white hunter's words to the others. The bearded trappers were accustomed to meeting danger coolly in any situation, remembering that the territory where they trapped teemed with savages. The Indians knew the character of the Pale-Face hunters. They had had many opportunities to appreciate their composure and skill. It often happened that two trappers had to hold off a band of a hundred Indians until help arrived. They stood back to back and kept aimed at anyone who dared approach them. The Indians' arrows couldn't reach men with firearms if the savages kept at a safe distance to avoid bullets. The trappers never fired simultaneously, always keeping one rifle ready while the other was reloaded. And they knew how to shoot excellently.

Little by little, the crowd dispersed, and soon no one was left in front of the tent.

«Now, I think, it's time to go watch the dances and shuffle our moccasins a bit ourselves,» Jack-Dog turned to Bear and smiled. «It's very merry there...»

Bear looked at his frightened sister, who was peeking out from the tent, and said to her:

«Don't be afraid, there are no enemies here. The spirits tell me nothing will happen.»

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

One day we were moving camp towards the Wolf Mountains and made a stop on the bank of a shallow, stony creek. During such stops, we never set up tipis, but if the sun beat down too harshly, the women would build small shelters for their husbands by draping the edge of a tent covering over four short poles. The laziest husbands would stretch out on the ground and demand to be fanned with fans made from bird wings.

Suddenly, to our surprise, we saw a rider. He was leisurely crossing the creek very close to where the children were playing noisily. It was a white man, but his clothing was different from the usual appearance of hunters. Nothing in his outfit was sewn from leather. Much later, when I visited the big cities of the Light-Eyed people, I saw many such garments and understood that cloth clothing is much softer and more comfortable than our leather shirts and leggings. But in those days, we were not yet accustomed to such attire. The stranger was leading a second horse by a rope, laden with bags and boxes. A crowd immediately gathered around him. The men pushed forward, holding bows and axes in their hands.

«Who are you?» shouted Short-Tailed Dog, grabbing the stranger's horse by the bridle. This warrior was always known for his coarse nature and his desire to intimidate any newcomer with his loud, barking voice.

But the white man showed not a trace of fear. He smiled broadly and took off his hat, which we were also seeing for the first time. It was very flat, like a flatbread, and had a brim sticking out in front, by which the stranger held his peculiar headgear. Some of our people reached out and felt the soft fabric of his trouser legs and shirt sleeves, sniffing at them.

«What are you looking for here?» Short-Tailed Dog continued to shout.

The Pale-Face replied with something and took from a bag slung over his shoulder an object very similar to Ichí-Mawani's mysterious notebook, but slightly larger. He turned the pages, and we saw incredibly lifelike

drawings. The faces of people looked back at us, and they seemed alive, except they didn't move! The Lakota did not know how to draw like that. We depicted everything much more simply and symbolically. Someone wanted to touch a drawing, but the Pale-Face moved back and turned the album towards himself. For a while, he scratched something in it, and we were silent. Such quiet only fell during moments when something mysterious was happening before people.

When he turned the page towards us, we saw ourselves upon it, just as the white man had seen us from his horse.

«Great medicine!» voices came from all sides. «Let him show us what else he can do.»

We allowed the strange man to travel with us. We all knew what a drawing was because our homes and clothes were always decorated with patterns and figures of animals and people. But none of us could work with our hands as skillfully as this artist. No one had imagined that an image could so strongly resemble a living form. The Pale-Face was immediately given the name Wakan Echónna («Holy/Mysterious Maker of Images»).

Upon reaching the foot of the Wolf Mountains, we set up camp, and life went on as usual. The children played noisily, the women tended to the household, the old women wandered through the village grumbling at the children, and the men gathered in small groups, devoting themselves to reminiscing. Everyone pretended not to pay attention to the Medicine Man while he made sketches of our dwellings from a distance. But as soon as he moved closer and asked someone to pose for him, everyone refused at once.

«It is medicine,» people explained. «We think you are taking a part of our souls and placing them in your drawings. Otherwise, how do they look so alive?»

The artist did not understand us because he only spoke his own language. He listened attentively to our long speeches and smiled. I knew only a few words of English but was unable to hold a conversation.

Sometimes he offered the women beads, and they agreed to sit before him while he worked with his pencils. Afterward, he would bring their portraits to the men and explain with signs that the women were braver than their husbands. Many took offense and drove him away, but some still gave their consent.

Among us lived a young man who, as an infant, had been captured

along with his mother from a Crow village. He did not remember his relatives at all and called himself a Lakota, although he knew he originated from an enemy tribe. In childhood, he often went to greet the sunrise by the riverbank, for which he was called Standing-On-The-Bank.

This young man was the first to decide to prove that he was not afraid of the white artist's magical skill. He dressed in a long, dark-brown leather shirt he had taken in a fight with the Blackfeet and took a large axe in his hands. Standing-On-The-Bank tied small wooden sticks with red marks into his hair, each mark representing a wound received in battle, and fastened a bundle of owl feathers behind his head. On his face, he left a yellow imprint of his own palm as a sign that he had brought back a captive from a raid.

The drawing resulted in an exact likeness of the same man. We were deeply shaken to our core because we saw two Standing-On-The-Banks before us. One of them was holding and examining the other!

After this, ten of our warriors immediately expressed a desire to be captured by the hand of the Medicine Man. He lived in the tipi of Weasel Tail, and first drew him. Then, for several days in a row, the others came to the tent. They all painted themselves in their best manner and dressed in their most picturesque outfits.

The Lakota were pleased, but every day they came to the Medicine Man to check that nothing had happened to their portraits.

But then a bad thing occurred. The Medicine Man was asked to make a large drawing at a council of the Fox Warriors before a war party. The Pale-Face gladly agreed, but when he showed what had come out on the paper, irritated cries rang out. I heard the noise of voices from the side and understood that the Lakota were greatly agitated. It is not permitted for outsiders to enter a warrior's lodge, but I hurried there, breaking the rules.

The first thing I saw was scattered papers and pencils in front of a painted buffalo skull that lay on a sod altar. The Medicine Man lay near the fire, pinned down by Short-Tailed Dog's foot, and was deathly pale. The Fox Warriors were making a clamor, and Short-Tailed Dog was brandishing a drawing clutched in his hand.

«The Medicine Man has cut off half of my body! Why did he do this? He wants half of my strength to leave me! He is a bad man, and I will kill him! Why has he taken half of my body?» screamed Short-Tailed Dog. He was terribly frightened and angry because the others saw his panic.

I snatched the drawing from his hand and saw that all the members of the Fox society were drawn, sitting in a row, but Short-Tailed Dog had not fit on the paper. Only the left half of his figure sat next to his friends; the right side was cut off by the edge of the sheet.

«This is a bad sign,» the other Lakota agreed.

«Let me kill him!» shouted Short-Tailed Dog. «He has taken half of my strength, he has doomed me to death, but I will have time to hack him down!»

Short-Tailed Dog grabbed a war club with a round stone head and struck the uncomprehending Pale-Face on the forehead. The skull cracked, and blood flowed towards the altar.

Now even those who had been calmer before raised a terrible cry.

«What have you done? You have committed murder in the sacred warrior's lodge! You have brought misfortune upon us!»

We believed that no one who had found shelter in our tents could be killed, even if they were the worst of enemies. For such a transgression, the Spirits would surely punish in the cruelest manner not only the murderer but the entire band, and the Lakota strictly observed this rule. But now Short-Tailed Dog, in his anger, had hacked down a guest.

I had never seen our warriors so bewildered. They ran outside and stood for a long time motionless, not knowing what to decide. Short-Tailed Dog came out last, dragging the dead Medicine Man behind him.

«We must leave this place urgently,» the elders decided, gathering before the Fox Warriors' tipi. «Order everyone to take down the tents.»

The camp quickly packed up, and we moved south. The Medicine Man's body was left lying there with its shattered head. All the artist's things were thrown down beside him. I heard that several of our young men returned there at night and chopped the corpse to pieces, leaving a smoldering bundle of sage nearby. But I do not know this for certain. However, I saw how all those whom the Medicine Man had drawn carefully wrapped their portraits in pieces of leather and hid them among their most valued possessions. Everyone was very afraid of damaging the drawings, as doing so could harm themselves.

And yet, one sheet was damaged — the very sheet that had caused all the trouble. The paper tore across the faces of Lame Deer and Standing-On-The-Bank. Those two refused to go on the raid and went into the mountains to pray and fast as soon as we made camp on the bank of Round

Stone Creek.

The Fox Warriors left on their raid two days later. Before that, they held a purification ceremony there and performed their society's dance.

The Medicine Man was remembered again only upon the party's return. A messenger rode into the village at dawn and warned the people to prepare for mourning. It turned out that during a night skirmish, when the Lakota had sneaked into the enemy's camp, they were ambushed. Three of our warriors were killed. Two of them could be retrieved and brought back to their relatives for burial. The third had to be left to be torn apart by the enraged enemies. It was Short-Tailed Dog.

THE BUFFALO WOMEN

An old Indian set aside his long-stemmed pipe and began his story.

«Blue Bird brought two beauties into his home, the Elk Woman and the Buffalo Woman, and made them both his wives. The last person who knew this family perished long ago in a thunderous battle, and now only silver-haired tellers of legends rise before the flickering hearth to retell words, lodged in memory, about a valiant man named Blue Bird.» The storyteller thoughtfully lowered his eyelids and shook his head sorrowfully, as if physically touching those distant days of which he spoke. «At first, the family lived in harmony. The Velvet Mountains surrounded the peaceful village. Withered leaves rustled in the parched grass as children ran through the camp with loud cries, playing. Hunters gathered to hunt for meat in the mountain forests, their faces gleaming with greasy paint. Pine trunks were reflected in the clear lakes. Life was good for everyone. But soon, Buffalo Woman began to feel that her husband showed more tenderness towards his other wife. A deep melancholy and burning jealousy took root in her heart. Neither the beautiful place where they lived, nor the peace that reigned around them, could restore Buffalo Woman's lost peace of mind. Life, which had recently been as colorful as a rainbow, suddenly turned into a continuous gray, rainy day… The world of people is strange and full of echoing twists and turns, in which humankind wanders, lighting signal fires for one another and luring each other into dark-green traps. One day, Buffalo Woman, filled with inexplicable jealousy, took her son named Rising Calf and went away somewhere. Blue Bird and Elk Woman waited a long time for her return, but she never appeared. Blue Bird could not believe his grief. The young woman, light as swan's down on the hands of the wind, so dear to his heart, had disappeared, holding a rocky weight of resentment in her soul. Blue Bird decided to set out to search for his wife and son. He felt obliged to speak to his wife directly, so she would not think him two-faced, so she would not believe he had two tongues instead of one. For many days he walked through the tall grass among the humpbacked hills, forced his way through dense forests, swam across cold,

swift rivers. He heard the murmuring of underwater creatures and the chirping of heavenly creatures. Finally, he reached an unknown land inhabited by enormous buffalo. There were incredibly many of them, perhaps as many as the stars in the sky. The surroundings grew hazy when the whole mass of them moved across the plain. Dust rose to the very clouds. Among them, he saw his wife. Buffalo Woman had found shelter among the mighty Buffalo.

«I want to take my son,» Blue Bird said to them, brandishing a richly feathered wand.

«So be it,» the Buffalo Tribe answered him, 'but to do this, you must pass several tests. First, you must recognize your son among our other children.»

Blue Bird went to the calves crowded to one side and discovered that they all looked almost identical. The same dark, wet noses, the same horns on curly heads. «Rising Calf,» Blue Bird began, 'do you not wish to return to your native home, where the fire burns especially for you, where your friends love you and tremble with impatience to see you? Does the blood of your father not speak in your body? Do you wish to remain faceless in this huge herd of bulls? Will the breath of my soul not sway your big heart? For you are not a bull, but a man.» And Rising Calf, the son of Blue Bird, responding to his father's words, nodded his head. Thus the father was able to pick him out from the general herd.

«Now you must race against our young bulls,» said the Buffalo...»

The old storyteller smiled and continued: «Those giants have fast legs; it was difficult to outrun them, but Blue Bird's invisible helpers lifted him into the air and turned him into a bird. He spread his wings, as a true bird should, and raced with the speed of the wind. Splashing his wings, he disappeared into the distant haze and turned back into a man. Like a force raised from the depths of the earth, an avalanche of bulls rolled towards him. But Blue Bird was already waiting for the huge herd at the finish line. The Buffalo could not defeat him in such a contest.

«Now you must face the final test,» they declared. «You must listen for four days and four nights to the ancient tales of our tribe, without leaving the fire where we will gather, and without falling asleep. Otherwise, your life will be broken.'... It was hard for Blue Bird, because he was very tired. And no one could help him. He fell asleep on the last night, weary from the monotonous voices and songs. His eyes closed, his head fell upon his chest.

The Buffalo immediately began a triumphant dance, approaching Blue Bird in a circle. With each step, their dance became more terrifying. Rising in a huge hump over the plain, the buffalo crowded over the man, and their feet began to trample Blue Bird. They danced over him until they had pounded him into the ground...

Blue Bird had a brother named Magpie. Leaving his home, Blue Bird told him that he had dreamed a dream in which it was revealed to him that a huge pillar of dust would rise to the clouds if something happened to him. And indeed, when the Buffalo Tribe performed its terrible dance, dust began to rise thickly to the sky. Seeing this, Magpie said to Elk Woman, «What my brother warned me about has happened. This is not a false alarm. Prepare a sweat lodge, and I will go search for his body. I must find at least a piece of his body.»

Flying to the place where the dust billowed, Magpie heard a moan and descended to the ground. There he found a single feather that had belonged to Blue Bird. He returned home with this small feather and placed it in the sweat lodge, where sacred purification ceremonies were always held. Then he stood outside and shouted, «Father! I have returned with my brother!» And he shot a black arrow into the sky, loudly exclaiming, «Be careful, my brother, the arrow might wound you!» Then he shot another black arrow and two red ones, each time warning Blue Bird. And with each shot, the lodge where the feather lay shook. After the flight of the fourth arrow, Blue Bird suddenly jumped out of the lodge. He was alive and well.

«I have much to tell my people,» he addressed his brother, 'but first we must prepare thoroughly, for the Buffalo are angry and will soon appear here.»

Elk Woman immediately suggested making four barriers around the village using cherry and poplar bark and willow branches. These turned out to be very strong fences, and the People felt secure behind them. The herd of Buffalo rushed across the land with a terrible roar. They tried to smash the barriers, but their curved horns got stuck between the willow withes, and the People fell upon them, plunging spears into their hearts. The animals managed to break through the first three barriers, but their strength was exhausted at the fourth. In this last fence, Buffalo Woman, who was leading the herd, got stuck, and Elk Woman killed her.

When the fight was over, Blue Bird ordered the people to build the

Buffalo Lodge, about which he had learned high in the Sky. The people carried out all his instructions, understanding that he was initiated into the mystery. He told them all the details of the ceremony that Our People were to perform from then on, and about the regalia that the members of the Buffalo Society must have. But he warned that all participants would turn into bulls and cows if they allowed themselves to make a mistake during the sacred ceremony. Since then, Our People regularly hold the festivity arranged by the women of the Buffalo Society…» The old storyteller fell silent and continued to sit in the same position.

The woman, who was translating from the Arapaho language into the Lakota dialect, looked at the white people sitting before her.

«Curious story,» Jack smiled. «Never heard it before. I confess, I've never seen that ceremony either. Though, I haven't interacted with the Arapahos that closely.»

«Why couldn't she tell the legend herself?» wondered Randal, shifting his position due to his legs falling asleep. «She surely knows all this. She could have spoken directly, without translating.»

«That's his affair. He is the keeper of antiquities. Officially, he is the one who brings all stories to the listeners. There are traditions of storytelling. You hear the singing of his voice, his pauses, which he holds for as long as he deems necessary. I swear by my last pair of moccasins, sometimes, listening to their tales, I think I'm missing something, because suddenly the story ends in a strange place, and the storyteller just sits in silence. And then suddenly starts speaking again…»

Behind them, five girls walked past, exchanging quiet words. On their heads, like hoods, lay buffalo hides sewn in a special way, covering their shoulders and upper backs as well. Small horns were fixed on the very top. Randal noticed large pieces of wood in their hands, which they were tapping together.

«They'll use these to make the sound of hoofbeats during the dance,» the translator explained.

«Time to go,» Jack pulled his fur hat off his head and tucked it into his belt. «It's all about to start for them now…»

In an enormous-sized lodge opposite the entrance sat a decrepit old man accepting various offerings. His thin arms looked like brown sticks with gnarled roots. Perhaps this was the last time he was conducting the Buffalo Women's festival. He chanted something and pulled from a large

bag a bundle of soft leather and a fluffy headdress and placed them on top of the pile of gifts. Quiet singing was heard to the sound of rattles. A young woman slowly knelt before the old man. An elderly woman approached her from behind, reached for the leather roll, and unfolded it. It turned out to be an apron, embroidered with black and yellow porcupine quills. The leather between the embroidery was red. Numerous buffalo tails hung from the top border. The old man slowly raised the headdress, first making four unintelligible movements in the air with his hands, and solemnly placed it on the head of the girl in the colorful apron. The headdress consisted of sixteen vertically standing long sticks, at the base of which large owl feathers were fixed, making the headdress incredibly lush, and two long black eagle feathers stuck out in front. The sticks themselves resembled arrow shafts and were attached to a red-and-black leather band, which was made of deer hide and rolled into a tube, symbolizing the body of a rattlesnake.

The elderly woman placed a bone whistle into the girl's mouth and thrust a bundle of reeds into her right hand. As soon as the lead dancer began to blow the whistle, making sounds like an eagle's cry, the woman helped her to her feet. The girl began to dance and sing. Others joined her, lining up in a row. After circling the lodge, they went outside and walked around the village four times. More and more people gathered around them. Then they returned to the Buffalo Lodge and near it began to accelerate their movements. One song replaced another. When the fourth melody ended, the dancers ran around the lodge at full speed, imitating the behavior of buffalo. Sometimes they fell to the ground and rolled over, like cows in the dust, kicking up their legs and shaking their heads. At times, they suddenly began to dart about fearfully, as if fleeing from arrows. Suddenly, a loudly singing man with a bow in his hand jumped out from somewhere and began to circle near one of the girls, brandishing his bow and arrows. He skillfully mimed a successful shot, and she fell. Then he swiftly pounced on her with a knife and, as it were, slit open the cow's belly, pulling a large piece of hidden fat from under the belt on the girl's dress.

Randal, who had been watching the exciting action with bated breath, suddenly laughed heartily. The performance remained a performance; none of the participants turned into real animals, no one killed anyone. He clapped Jack-Dog on the shoulder with some relief, because in the middle

of the dance he had felt himself slipping into a strange state, and shadows had begun to swim before his eyes. There was a moment when he could have sworn that instead of the supple girls, jumping, humpbacked carcasses of bearded bulls were before him…

«Yes, old man, they are good at this! This you can't take away from them!» he exclaimed, watching the dancers who, with cheerful cries, suddenly rushed to the river, then, slapping the water with their palms, the participants ran back.

«That's also part of the ceremony,» Jack explained, «a footrace. To be the first to return is a good sign… And now they will shake themselves off, as buffalo do after a dust bath, and go to the sweat lodge to tidy themselves up and get back to their daily work…»

RANDALL SCOTT

From the diary

July 16, 1845

Yesterday, near Fort Laramie, a military parade was held with the aim of intimidating the redskins. The thing is, the Arapaho recently brutally killed about a dozen white hunters who were wandering near their camps. It's hard to say what caused this sudden outburst of anger from the Indians, but they declared that from now on they would spare no Pale-Face who appeared on their territory. The Cheyenne and Lakota are also showing aggression. Perhaps they are becoming irritated by the constant appearance of immigrant wagons. In any case, we have to keep our eyes open. The Arapaho did not kill the hunters by chance, since they took the trouble to slash their bodies.

That's when the soldiers appeared. Five companies of dragoons and artillery. I remember the expression of utmost confusion on the faces of the savages. The soldiers seemed terribly formidable to them as they rode in a neat column on powerful horses, dressed in identical uniforms, the buttons of which blazed in the sun. The Indians were also shocked by the amount of firearms and the number of soldiers. The prairie tribes had never seen such a concentration of white people before, and here, when only military men stood before them, the Indians seemed to ponder: how many more of all sorts of traders and hunters remain in those lands from which the white men come?

The Sioux were the most numerous here, but Cheyenne and Arapaho also came. On behalf of the Sioux, Bull's Tail, a very decrepit old man, spoke for a long time. He leaned on a spear with both hands, a spear wrapped in fur and adorned with eagle feathers along its entire length.

There was a lot of talk today. The atmosphere is somewhat tense, although Colonel Kearny offered friendship and distributed gifts. But he looked at the Arapaho with marked severity and threatened to wipe out the entire tribe if they touched even one more European.

The soldiers fired a couple of cannon shots, which terrified the savages. Many fell to the ground.

In the evening, they sent up signal rockets. What a commotion there was! The savages showed indescribable astonishment and delight!

In this camp, I met Mato. When the cannons boomed, he was standing near me, and I felt his excitement and even the trembling in his body transfer to me. He is a strange man. Mysterious. He knows how to transfer his state onto others. I am easily influenced and can do nothing about it.

He said he would immediately go to his village to tell them what he had seen. He asked if I would come, because Maggie had missed me for a long time.

August 20

Two days ago, Jack-Dog, Pierre Rillieux, and I arrived at the Arapaho camp. They are very courteous. We profitably traded a lot of furs from them.

Their village is no different from a Sioux camp, except it gives the impression of a less tidy place. They treated us excellently, as there was plenty of meat in the village after a recently successful hunt. I saw large piles of meat in several places, around which dogs, gorged to the point of exhaustion, were stretched out.

The chief actively offered me to take his youngest daughter as a wife. I got out of it by telling him I had neither horses nor enough good things with me to give him for his beloved daughter.

Today, the ceremony of the women's Buffalo Society is to take place. We have been invited to watch.

I can only explain the Indians' emphasized friendliness by the fact that they are expecting the army to appear. However, the soldiers are not coming.

Jack-Dog and I decided to leave, but Pierre Rillieux wants to stay.

It suddenly struck me that Jack has aged greatly over the past year. He walks slowly, mounts his horse with difficulty, coughs incessantly, and breathes with an unpleasant wheeze. The small part of his face not covered by hair, due to countless wrinkles, resembles cracked, sun-baked brown earth.

August 30, 1845

No news from Pierre. I think he is dead. I heard that the Arapaho have sent out war parties again.

September 15

We are in the Oglala camp.

Mato constantly questions me about white people, and his questions are very profound. He pronounces many English phrases with surprising ease, although he very rarely has the opportunity to communicate with me. I mastered the Oglala dialect because Maggie is often by my side, although I traveled without her this past year. But Mato manages to grasp an incredible amount of English speech during my week-long stay in his camp. If this continues, I'm sure he will soon be able to converse with me in my native language without any difficulty. He has an amazing mind.

My son Dick has noticeably grown during my absence. There is nothing of the white man in him. He looks one hundred percent Indian. He didn't recognize me and ran out of the tipi as if I had frightened him.

September 20, 1845

A most interesting conversation with Mato took place today. I asked him what he thought about the white people's God, whether he accepts Him. He answered only after we had smoked all the tobacco in the pipe.

«You speak as if the Creator of Life is different for each people. But He is one, He exists always and everywhere. Yesterday He was already in tomorrow. And tomorrow He will be in all the past winters.»

«You call Him Wakan-Tanka (Wakȟáŋ Tȟáŋka). Is that the name of the most important being?»

«No. That is not a name. It is not a being. It is everything around us and inside us. It is Taku-Shkan-Shkan, the force of all forces.»

«What force?»

«The force that makes the wind rush over the earth, makes water flow in the river, makes smoke rise upwards, makes blood run in our bodies. If there is no Shkan, then there is nothing.»

«You said the word Shkan, but first Taku-Shkan-Shkan. Is it the same thing?»

«Yes.»

«And is Wakan-Tanka also Shkan?»

«Yes.»

«Is it the Great Spirit?»

«The Great Spirit is Shkan, and it is part of Wakan-Tanka.» Crazy Bear spoke slowly, giving me a chance to understand this unimaginably complex structure. I hastily wrote down our conversation, and the Indian watched the movement of my hand attentively. He spoke in his native language.

Therefore, I constantly turned to Jack for clarification, as he knew all the intricacies of their peculiar language, while I could only converse on a basic level.

«Explain to me more precisely, what is Shkan?»

«Literally, this word means movement. Therefore, Shkan is in everything that moves. More precisely, that which has Shkan inside it begins to move. It is also the sky.»

«That, as I understand it, is the Great Spirit.»

«The Great Spirit is Nagi-Tanka,» Jack laughed. «Why do you need all this, Scott?»

«And what exactly does Wakan-Tanka mean?»

«Tanka means great. And Wakan implies very many different things, but it is always something mysterious and inexplicable. They also say a woman during her menstruation is wakan. Even whiskey, according to the Indians, contains wakan.»

«Why?»

«A person who drinks becomes abnormal.»

Then I turned to Mato again:

«Is Wakan everywhere?»

«Wakan-Tanka is everywhere. Everything has a spirit. This spirit is Wakan. If Wakan-Tanka wants to do something to a person, He informs him through visions.»

«What does He look like?»

«He doesn't. He has no single face. The Sun, the Sky, the Earth, the Stone — they are Wakan-Tanka. These can be seen. But He is not any one of them. There are many small Wakan, each strong in their own way, but all together they constitute Wakan-Tanka. If I pray to one of them, I call it by a specific name so that my words reach it. But I can also address Wakan-Tanka directly. It is like the hairs on a person's head. The hairs are not the whole person, but only an insignificant part of him. And the person is not the hairs. But the hairs are part of the person, and there are infinitely many of them.»

«So, you have no image of Wakan-Tanka, like we have Christ, to whom we pray?»

«I saw such a figure with the Black Robe (Jesuit priest). He is not Wakan-Tanka, because he is a man, but he is Wakan, Lila-Wakan. One can pray to him, as he is connected to the Great Spirit and the Creator.»

And then the Bear said something that made my eyes pop out in amazement.

«I have spoken with the one you gave the name Christ.»

«What?» Even Jack-Dog choked.

«I had a vision. He was naked, all covered in blood, and lying on the ground before a tall wooden cross. The cross was enormous, its top lost in thick clouds. And the horizontal beam sometimes became not wooden, but alive, like an eagle's wings. The sky had descended very low over the bloodied man. It seemed to me that Shkan wanted to wrap the tormented body of this man with clouds to conceal it… I approached and bent down. The one lying there had long, light hair, tangled and matted with blood. His face was badly swollen from numerous blows. Clearly, he had been beaten for a long time. I don't know who did it, I didn't see anyone nearby. Thorny branches were twisted around his head, and the thorns were deeply embedded in his forehead. At first glance, he was not a strong warrior, but I saw clearly how Ni glowed deep within his body.»

«What is Ni?»

«Ni is what gives a person strength, but not the strength of arms and legs. Ni maintains purity inside a person.»

«And you saw how He glowed from within?»

«Yes. He unstuck his eyes, looked at me, and stood up. But he did it as if someone invisible was lifting him by the arms. He almost disappeared into the clouds when he straightened up. Blood ran down his body. I asked if he needed help, and he smiled at me. I have never felt anyone so pleasant to me as this wounded man. He said he was performing an important ritual, that he had to go through suffering to purify the souls of many people. I saw deep, torn wounds on his hands and feet and asked if he was performing a Sun Dance, for the Lakota also subject themselves to great torment during that ceremony. He explained to me that his ritual could be compared to the Sun Dance, but it was more important, more difficult. And then he became huge, like a mountain, and from his chest, where there was a large wound, blood gushed out and turned into a waterfall. I undressed and stepped into the bloody stream to wash myself in it. After that, I raised my head and asked the giant what to call him. He placed his palm on his left breast and said that he should not be called by name.»

«What happened next?»

«He disappeared. The Sky absorbed him.»

I tried not to miss a word. It seemed incredible that such a fantastic picture had been revealed to him. If only some missionary could hear this. Mato spoke without a trace of excitement, spoke slowly and calmly, as if he was not shocked by what he was telling, as if such things were familiar to him. However, Mato had already proven more than once that he had access to a world I couldn't even dream of. I should be used to it by now, but alas.

September 21

Talking with Mato again. Such conversations proceed very slowly because I try to write down the words immediately. Sometimes I have to correct something in the scribbles after the conversation.

«What can a man do if Wakan-Tanka governs everything?» I ask him.

«A man can do everything that Wakan-Tanka allows, because only for that does Wakan-Tanka put power into him. If a man does something wrong, he is punished.»

«In what way?»

«There are many ways. Wakan-Tanka sends sickness or can kill the man. But He can kill relatives or friends to warn the man that he needs to act differently. But few understand this.»

«That is, He can kill not me, but others, even if I am guilty?»

«Yes.»

«Why?»

«You may be needed for some purpose, which you do not know, and you need to be guided.»

«But why destroy the innocent?»

«Everyone has guilt,» Mato answered calmly, and I felt a chill in my heart. Then he was silent for a moment and continued: «And there are people whom the Creator made specifically to use them as a lesson for others. None of us knows completely why he was sent into this world. Everyone fulfills his task. The purpose of some is to serve as food for others. And that is not only animals. Some people also serve as game.»

«Does the Great Spirit really give birth to someone only to destroy them?»

«You were born with white skin, and I with dark skin. But neither you nor I know why it happened that way. We are part of the Great Mystery. We serve purposes about which we know nothing. At birth, each of us is given a Sichun.»

«What is Sichun?»

«It is the spirit that accompanies us throughout our life until death. But it does not die, it is eternal. It is a part of each of us, therefore we are also eternal. We are accustomed to seeing our friends perish. We say goodbye to them when we place the dead body on a burial scaffold. But the spirit does not die. It is our main part. It is more important than the body, although it uses the body and lives in it. Without it, there is no man. Sichun is a constituent part of Wakan-Tanka.»

«If we are eternal, how can we be punished? How can we be killed? Doesn't Wakan-Tanka know that we are immortal?»

«Wakan-Tanka knows everything, because He is everything. But man thinks that the body is the main thing, because it drinks and eats, because it feels pleasure and pain. Man thinks that he ends when the body dies. Wakan-Tanka takes life from the body when the person has fulfilled what is destined for him, or if he hinders others from doing their work. But then the person comes here again to correct his mistakes.»

«The person is born again?»

«Yes.»

I am again stunned, as I was yesterday when I heard from him about Christ. Essentially, he is telling me about resurrection, but not in the form the Bible speaks of it. He confounds me. I don't know what to ask him. I am not prepared for a conversation with this strange savage.

«Is Wakan-Tanka evil?»

«No,» Mato answers without hesitation.

«Kind?»

«No.»

«What is He like?»

«Neither. He is everything that is around and inside. Can everything be of one kind?»

I end the conversation.

September 22

Jack told me it was time for him to die. He laughed at my curiosity. Said that it was he, not I, who ought to be sniffing out the afterlife.

October 1, 1845

Mato is planning to join the Sioux delegation being taken to Washington. He is sure that the life of his people will change soon, but first there will be much sorrow. He is strange. As always, he knows many

things he tells no one about. Once I asked him why he doesn't reveal to his people what the spirits tell him. He said: «People will not understand now. They will comprehend it after receiving a terrible lesson. That's what the spirits told me.»

October 15

Yesterday Jack-Dog whispered to me: «A man should die like a bird that hits a rock at full speed. But I am drying up like an old stump. Now I can't even hold a pipe in my hands.»

Today he died. In the morning, when we got up, he was still sleeping. Maggie was the first to hear that he wasn't breathing.

Mato gave orders for a small tent to be set up for Jack. The women did it very quickly. I have often encountered such tipis in areas with few trees, and we are currently on the prairie. Inside the tent, they lit braided sweetgrass and prepared a bed for old Jack from a buffalo hide, tanned white, with magical drawings. When he was laid down, the edges of the hide were thrown over him, as if he had covered himself with them. All his weapons were left beside him. Someone brought his horse, cut off its head, and mounted it on a pole in front of the entrance to the tipi. Mato covered Jack's face with red ochre, smearing his entire beard as well. On his chest, between his palms, they placed a beaded bag with a pipe.

All this time, two old men beat drums nearby, singing a farewell song.

It feels strange to think that Jack-Dog will never speak to me again, that he will not laugh heartily, coughing every minute. I see that he is dead, but I do not feel it.

Thoughts of death visit me more and more often. What are our desires given to us for? Why do we strive somewhere if everything will be cut short at once? If death takes everything from us, then life itself is nothing!

I just remembered: when a bullet pierced my arm last time, I saw blood in a special way for the first time. I saw that it was not something independent, but it was me. I myself was flowing from my wound. I was dripping onto the ground, soaking into the earth, dissolving. So, a part of me will never return to me, it will remain in that very earth. It turns out I am already a little buried somewhere.

I wish I understood what Mato understands. He is calm. He is not like the other Indians. He does not strive for honors and is not a member of any warrior society. But everyone insists that he was the most ferocious fighter of the tribe. What changed him? Only once did I see him ride out ahead

of the others to meet the Crows who were attacking our camp. He knocked two enemies down with incredible ease and turned his horse back to the camp. The other Oglalas arrived at that moment and joined the battle. Mato stopped the enemies, but took no trophies, did not participate in the victory dance, did not boast of his exploits that day. It was as if he had done what was required of him and left the stage. He is very strange.

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

Life is always changing, but few know which way it will turn in the near future. In my youth, I could never have imagined that I would voluntarily leave the warpath.

Even today, I see myself very clearly alongside my friends on the hilly prairie, see us galloping on swift horses towards enemies, their naked bodies covered in sacred paint. I remember all the battles with the Crows among the Blue Mountains. I have not forgotten a single moment of the fierce fight when we marched against the tribe of the Owl Feathers, who lived in earth lodges surrounded by a wooden wall, like a white man's fortress. I remember numerous skirmishes with the Wolves on the plains.

I was proud of my exploits, I boasted of the scalps taken from fallen foes. But that was long ago. Then everything changed.

The reason for that was Red Elk. You already know about this.

But I have not told you about the time I went with our chiefs to see the one the white people called the Great Father. I did not understand then who could be called that, because I knew only one Great Father, whose name is Wakan-Tanka. And when, after a long journey, we arrived in the city of Washington, I was greatly surprised to see before me an ordinary man. He was not the Great Father, just like all the others after him. Among our people, he could not have held the place of a war chief, because he did not possess sufficient strength. This was evident from his face. But there were always many white people around him, showing him signs of respect. Later I heard them call him president, but they never called him Great Father when speaking to him. They were simply deceiving us.

I remained silent the entire way, from the moment I stepped aboard the steamboat. In the very distant past, I thought it was the evil water spirit Unktehi. But it turned out to be just a huge boat, steered by a white man. The farther we sailed, the more often we saw the wooden houses of white people. At first, they stood in groups of two or three near forts, then I saw

the first city, and it astonished me. But it was not the largest. We passed through many others. And everywhere lived white people. There turned out to be many more of them than stars in the sky.

I understood then that the Lakota knew nothing about life. And none of our neighbors, friendly or hostile, knew anything either. We thought the land was boundless, that only Indians lived on its vast expanses.

I was sure the Light-Eyed ones were a small tribe that had strayed onto our lands. I first saw many white hunters when I went with Ichi-Mawani to a trading camp in the land of the Snakes. Then I saw many, many Pale-Faced warriors when they came to the fort on Horse Creek and fired their cannons there. We were all greatly surprised by their numbers then. But no one imagined how many there really were. When I disembarked from the steamboat, I understood that the entire land was covered with them. And not only them. I saw people with completely black skin too. But the Light-Eyed ones were the most numerous.

I was not afraid. I had already learned not to feel fear, because I knew that Wakan-Tanka guides our lives. If there were many Pale-Faces, that was the Creator's will. And I understood that the white hunters in our parts were the first of those who were to follow. Our life was bound to change soon. After the meeting with the president, I knew for certain that similar big cities would appear on our lands. I also knew that all Indians would resist this.

This is what the voices of the invisible world meant when they whispered to me that terrible sorrow would fall upon my people, that we would receive a dreadful lesson. At the time, I thought it was about the smallpox, which killed thousands of people in just a few days. But after visiting the world of the Light-Eyed ones, I understood everything completely. The white people told us that their cities stood where tribes of Indians had lived before.

The Pale-Faces wanted us to understand and convey to our people the power they possessed. How could one not understand? Only a blind and stubborn man could fail to see our future. Having been to the country of the Pale-Faces, I would have known the outcome of the matter, even if the Great Spirit had not spoken to me through his messengers.

Lame Dog from our village traveled with me. He was very old, and the shock of what he saw bent him more than all the years he had lived. For the first few days after we returned to our village, he only shook his head

despondently, even though all the men of the tribe gathered around us to hear our words. So, I did the talking, although he was much older. I am not sure the people believed me. They listened with exclamations of surprise and asked questions over and over, but I know they did not truly grasp what I was telling them. I think I too would not have been able to imagine such things if I had heard a similar story from someone else. It was like a fiction.

Everyone was agitated, but calmed down very quickly.

«Even if there are many whites, the land is enough for all. We have nothing to fear. We are strong, we can defend ourselves,» that's what the Lakota said. «If they come to us with war, we will be able to defeat them.»

They had already forgotten how the cannon shot had stunned us all, how the cannon first roared, enveloping itself in smoke, and then with the same noise threw up a column of earth far in front of itself.

I knew trouble was creeping up on us.

I wanted to find Ichi-Mawani and ask him to take his son to the world of the Pale-Faces. He could make Moonlight into a man who knew the white people from the inside. He had the name Dick, Lakota blood and Light-Eyed blood ran in his veins. I knew Ichi-Mawani had been sent to me not by chance, and fate had proven this. I was sure that he himself was only part of the great design of the Great Spirit. His son was another part of this design. Dick Moonlight was to gain knowledge in the world of the Light-Eyed ones and return to the Lakota to lead them.

I sailed away on the steamboat in the fall and returned to the Lakota in the summer. And upon returning, I did not find Ichi-Mawani in our lodges. Magaju-Winna told me that her husband had gone away again.

THE DRIFTER

It was already completely dark when Randall Scott reached the small Indian camp on the bank of Big Grass Creek, located in a deep hollow between steep hills. It was Falling Bird's group, one of the southern communities of the Lakota. Randall knew Falling Bird well, having visited him repeatedly in the company of the Bear; about three years ago, he had even wintered in this community with his family.

The seven lodges were almost completely dissolved in the gloom of the advancing night, but a red flicker was visible inside one. A deep silence reigned. It seemed there was no one in the dwellings.

Approaching the lit-up lodge, the traveler stopped but heard no sound except the muffled stomping of his two horses' hooves; one was laden with tight packs. A woman came out and took the reins.

He entered inside and saw many Indians. They were crowded in a tight circle around the hearth, and the fire reflected in their black pupils. In complete silence, they made room, giving the newcomer a chance to sit near the entrance.

Time stood still. Someone in the community had passed away; the people were grieving. A piece of the living flesh of the large family had died.

Randall involuntarily sighed and thought it would have been better if he had camped elsewhere, had he known they were seeing someone off to the next world.

The whole night passed in such silence. At times, the fire almost died out, plunging the tipi into darkness, and then some woman would add kindling, and the flaring flame would outline relief faces in the black space.

At dawn, the gathered people stood up and picked up the bundles lying behind each of them — farewell gifts for the deceased. One by one, they entered the neighboring tipi where the dead man lay. He was in a sitting position, dressed in a ceremonial shirt, and seemed to be patiently waiting for the appearance of his tribesmen, his eyes closed. It turned out to be Falling Bird's younger brother, who was considered the war chief of the

group.

Randall silently cursed the unlucky night, this endlessly long and unnecessary farewell, his own fatigue. He wanted to sleep and eat but knew that no one would feed him at such a time.

He went to his horses and hastily left the camp in the direction of the White River, disappearing into the fog. Behind him, the loud wailing of women could already be heard, sounding like many wolves mournfully answering each other.

Randall intended to cross the White River, which the Lakota called the Smoky Earth, reach the Bad River, descend along it to Fort Pierre, and there board a steamboat to St. Louis. He desperately wanted a change of scene after the long winter spent among the Oglala. Since the day of Jack-Dog's death, he had been plagued by a strange heaviness of soul.

«You have a tipi, a family, fine horses,» he said to himself. «You can go to any corner of this vast land. What more could one want?»

The twelve years spent side by side with Jack-Dog had left their mark, although Randall would never have thought the old trapper had taken such a large place in his soul. Since last summer, a beautiful and always attentive wife had been by Randall's side daily. His seven-year-old son, with clear signs of a future war leader, had grown to love him again and constantly showered him with naive questions (why does father often speak a foreign language, why is his face covered with hair, why doesn't he go with the other men against the Crow People?). Anyone accustomed to nomadic life, who considered a shack built of spruce boughs sufficient comfort, could feel quite happy — what more did he need? But Randall Scott, nicknamed Ichi-Mawani, clearly saw that he missed Jack. He missed that calm, quiet, experienced reliability that the Dog radiated. Randall suddenly realized that in old Jack, he had lost the only friend in his life whom he trusted blindly and whom, it turned out, he had considered almost a father.

Once, this trapper had told Randall that a man who had tasted the wild charm of the mountains and plains and was not frightened by that taste would never be able to live in an ordinary city.

«But you didn't tell me, old Jack, that one who has known friendship cannot live without a friend, without feeling a constant chill of loneliness,» Scott muttered under his breath. «What are my wife and son to me if they are part of a home I never sought? They are an attribute of family, and I am

accustomed to wandering. A roof is only needed for sleeping… Now I'm dragging myself to the city. I'll sell all the furs there, and then what? I'll squander all the money. I'll wander the streets where no one will stop you and invite you into their home for a meal… Sometimes the city seems worse than a desert to me… I have no business with it… But I don't want to be here either…»

Randall craved change, hoping it would alter something inside him, and he refused to think about where they might lead him.

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

The Lakota were always one big family. We were all close relatives to each other. It was customary for us to always call our father's brother 'father,» and our mother's sister 'mother.» But our father's sister and mother's brother (they are of the opposite sex) we called aunt and uncle. All children born to the father's brother and the mother's sister were considered brothers and sisters. And the children of those we called uncle and aunt (mother's brother and father's sister) were considered cousins. To you white people, this may seem complicated, but it was easy for us because we always lived with it; we understood why it was so.

Dick Moonlight, the son of Ichi-Mawani, was my sister's son, so he was supposed to call me uncle. But each of our children also had second parents, chosen by the real father and mother from among relatives or friends. My wife and I were chosen as Moonlight's second parents.

One day I said to him:

«I want to talk with you.»

«I am listening to you, father,» he said to me and sat down opposite me.

«The blood of a brave warrior stirs within you. I see that. But I want to warn you about some things to which people are usually blind and deaf. You know that the Great Power governs us, that it breathes life into our bodies and prescribes for each of us to walk our own special Path. I have heard the voices of the Thunder Beings many times, and they spoke to me about you... You are destined for a holy life, my son. I know how hard it is for a strong young man to renounce the warrior's path, not to take part in heated battles, not to boast of his merits before relatives and friends. But the life of a sage is also a warrior's path. And this path is more difficult than the War Path. Look at me. I enjoyed the fame of the most fearless fighter in our tribe, but I laid down my weapons because a very strong Wichasha-Wakan, known among our people as Red Elk, told me to do so. But I did not

become more cowardly, nor weaker. When necessity demands, I go out to defend my people and kill enemies. But I do not run after glory, I do not participate in celebrations because I cannot celebrate anyone's death, not even the death of our enemies… I want to tell you that the Great Spirit has laid before you a Path much harder than mine. He gave you a father from a powerful people, whose children are more numerous than the stars in the sky. The white people possess the whole world, and we must learn to live as they live, otherwise we will perish. Today we are like a handful of sand before a huge, onrushing wave… When I heard the voice of the Sky, commanding me to give my sister in marriage to a foreigner, I did not hesitate, because the invisible country of Shadows lives both in us and around us. It is greater than we are. It guides us. What happens there is reflected here. When the Spirits command us to do something, we must obey, because we do not always discern the right path before us. The Spirits come to help. But if we resist and act according to our own will, we break the law of the Creator. For this, people are punished. First a little, then more strongly. Wakan-Tanka arranges small troubles for us, showing that we are mistaken in our choice of path. Then he strikes us more strongly, sending us sickness, and then the death of loved ones. If we do not understand, then Wakan-Tanka makes our relatives and friends suffer greatly before death. With this, the Creator tries to awaken our attentiveness, our consciousness.»

«Father, why doesn't Wakan-Tanka simply kill the one who has transgressed?»

«If a person is born for a specific mission, if the necessary forces are placed in him, but he does not want to walk the Path destined specifically for him, then he should be destroyed only at the very last moment, when he has finally lost his way, when the power given to him irrevocably begins to serve another purpose.»

«What should I do then?»

«You are born to become a great chief.»

«Will I accomplish many deeds?»

«You are destined to become a holy man. You must not wage war. The Thunder Beings will soon come to you so that you may hear their voices. I can only tell you one thing: do not strive to become a war chief. Every raid for enemy scalps will distance you from your true destiny. Every surge of your hatred will strike your friends and relatives.»

«What kind of man am I if I cannot demonstrate my masculine qualities? How will the Lakota believe in my strength?»

«You are repeating the question I asked Red Elk. I too was tormented and could not immediately lay aside the quiver and arrows, the axe and the gun. But one day I understood that it was necessary… However brave and strong a man may be, he remains merely a man — a tiny grain of sand in the great stream of life. You will not be able to become the best, because there are no best. I fought much, hunted much, but what are my deeds compared to the actions of the entire people? Think about what I have told you, my boy.»

I understood perfectly well the confusion Moonlight was in. He was my own reflection. Just so had I sat before Red Elk and could make no sense of it. But at that time, I was already communicating with the World of Shadows. Moonlight did not yet have visions. It was difficult for him.

For many days we sat together, and I explained to him that he needed to leave our land and go with his father to the country of the Pale-Faces to gain knowledge there. He remained silent in response. He did not say «yes» to me, nor did he say «no.»

In the end, he stood up and said gloomily:

«I have heard your words.»

This meant that I should not try to convince him further. He had understood me, but the decision remained with him.

THE RETURN

In the summer of 1848, Randall Scott appeared on the banks of the Platte River, accompanied by three individuals of a shifty appearance. For over a year, he had been searching the city for people willing to join him in prospecting for gold in the Black Hills, but everyone looked at his proposals with obvious suspicion. Streams of immigrants rolled along the well-worn road to the opposite end of the continent, intoxicated by the hope of getting rich in two days. But Randall wanted to return to a region he knew, which had become dear and desirable to him. But he wanted to return not as a fur trapper, forever dependent on fur buyers, but as a free prospector, easily filling his purse with gold.

«Dig in the ground in Sioux territory? You're insane!»

«I know these people and I can negotiate with them,» he tried to convince.

«Times are changing. The Sioux are acting too hostile; they are almost at war with the army... I'd rather go to California via the Oregon Trail. There's definitely gold there.»

«That's still a road through Sioux country...»

He did eventually find three willing men who didn't inspire his full confidence, but they claimed to understand geology. With their help, he hoped to quickly find what he had long dreamed of.

They sailed on an overloaded steamboat to Westport and disembarked there, merging with the buzzing stream of immigrants. Wagon trains were being organized everywhere. Excited people scurried through the streets, questioning each other for information about wagon masters to secure a reliable spot. Here and there in the crowd were painted Indians with smoothly shaved heads, begging something from the white people. Some savages were dressed in worn-out shirts and jackets traded from the immigrants.

Randall, who had seen all this many times, indifferently pushed through the mass of people and headed to the corral, where he knowledgeably selected three pack mules and four horses for himself and

his companions.

On the twentieth day of their journey, they overtook a long string of covered wagons, from which many tired faces looked at them with envy. These immigrants faced a long and difficult journey, at the end of which most of them would face deep disappointment.

Closer to the Platte River, they met about ten Pawnees. The Indians were poorly dressed and were begging for food with signs. They followed the travelers all day and camped nearby at night. Since the Indians behaved completely calmly, Randall wasn't worried. But in the morning, riding ahead to scout the area, he heard gunfire behind him. Returning at a fast gallop, he found one of his companions lying face down in a pool of blood, dust floating on its surface. The second was squatting, holding his head in his hands, but was not wounded, only badly pistol-whipped with his own confiscated gun. The third, breathing heavily, rode up to Randall, leading the two pack mules by the reins.

«They approached us and suddenly grabbed our horses by the bridles,» he began, his eyes wide. «I broke free, but these two were pulled from their saddles. I fired a shot, and they rode off, but Baker was struck with an axe when he grabbed some redskin's leg…»

Randall's frightened companions turned back, flatly refusing to go any further. Death had proven stronger than the passion for gold.

Randall reached Fort Laramie alone and spent about five days there. A dozen Indian lodges were always pitched near the military post. Their inhabitants had adapted to living next to the soldiers, scraping by on handouts from passing wagon trains and dressing in the crumpled clothes of white people. The Lakota called them «Those-Who-Hang-Around-the-Fort» or «Loafers.» Among these Loafers, Scott recognized three warriors from the band of wild Oglalas. They had traded some wolf pelts for a pack of cartridges and were now preparing to return to their home camp, which, they said, was located somewhere on Cherry Creek along with the Pitiful Community. They didn't belong strictly to the Oglalas or the Sichangus, although this group often lived with the latter, roaming between the White River and the North Fork of the Platte River.

The Indians didn't seem particularly friendly but allowed him to ride along. They didn't engage in conversation with him and even tried not to look at Randall, although he noticed them casting sidelong glances at his rifle and pistol. The entire way, he didn't allow himself to relax, fearing

robbery from them, but the Indians didn't touch him. Thus, with his finger on the trigger, he reached Cherry Creek. In the camp, Randall found a woman named Black Doe, who was a cousin of Walking Fox, and through her, he learned where the village of Strange Bear was located.

«Their group is now on Long Gray Stone Creek along with several bands of the Burnt Thighs [Sicangu]. But you shouldn't go there alone. Our people are very angry. The Lakota are talking of war against the Pale-Faces. They might kill you if you go alone. A bad time for a man with white skin,» said Black Doe, and Randall agreed with her, seeing the grim faces around.

Only a month later did he reach the encampment on Long Gray Stone Creek, where Oglalas and Sichangus had gathered. There, Maggie threw herself on his chest, and the Bear shook his hand, as is the custom among white people.

«I had a dream,» the Bear smiled. «I knew Ichi-Mawani would appear... I want to talk... I bought good tobacco at the trading post and prepared an excellent mixture...»

Sitting before a cozy fire, Randall listened to his red-skinned brother-in-law's story about his journey to New York and Washington, about a conversation with the president himself, and silently marveled at how much had happened during his absence. He felt completely at ease, sitting in the company of these Indians. Opposite him sat his wife, her legs tucked under her, as is proper for Lakota women.

Autumn approached. The surrounding forest gradually turned gray, losing its yellowed leaves and becoming bare. Here and among the black trunks, the white streaks of thin birch trees could be seen. The stony bottom of the clear stream was visible, with silvery fish darting swiftly above it. Behind the forest massif rose the gloomy mountain cliffs of the country with the mysterious name Paha Sapa — the Black Hills.

Autumn was considered an unsuitable time for war parties. It was necessary to hunt and prepare meat for winter, and soon the camp packed up and moved out for a big hunt.

The days were quiet. Everything followed its course. Time flowed away leisurely, carrying away sorrows and joys and bringing new ones closer with each passing hour. Winter came unnoticed. Several times, small groups of young men rode north into the sparkling snowy distance to fight the Crow Tribe and, upon returning, drove back a few horses. After this, festive dances were held in the village...

Randall's wife became pregnant again, which caused him noticeable annoyance because it deprived him of her affections. No amount of persuasion could make Maggie share his bed once she understood that new life had been conceived within her. She strictly observed the rules prescribed for women in her condition.

One day, the Bear came to Randall's tipi and, after smoking a pipe with him, resolutely started a conversation about Dick:

«You must take your son to your country. Moonlight knows nothing of the white man's world.»

«Why does he need to know? Is it bad here?»

«Most of our people do not understand what a white man is and are preparing for war against your brothers. This will lead to great trouble… Moonlight must understand that life is not limited to these prairies, that there are your huge houses, cities. You are your son's father not by accident. You must fulfill what is required of you.»

«I know. You brought your sister to me not because she needed a man, or I needed a woman. You had something else in mind.»

«You were meant to give life to a man who could lead the people. But for that, you must show him the world, the vast world of the Pale-Faces.»

«I am obliged to no one,» Randall retorted indignantly.

«If a person leaves his Path, he perishes. So say the Spirits. Do not turn away from them. You know that life is governed not by your desires, but by the Creator. He sends each of us to earth, gives us our faces, our voices. But we must not pride ourselves on our beauty, our skill, our strength, because Wakan-Tanka made us thus. All who fly, crawl, walk, whether they have four legs or two, all are children of the One Spirit. But man is created to, while remaining part of the whole, be able to correct mistakes, build the future, guide life. He must soar high, like an eagle.»

«I don't understand you.»

«You were sent to our land to meet me, to give life to a boy, to introduce him to the white man's world and give him knowledge. This boy is destined to grow into a great chief, if you do as I tell you.»

«And if not?» Randall smirked.

«Then you will perish. Such is the law. He who leaves his Path has no more business here…»

Randall Scott continued to sit with a crooked smile on his lips, but he felt sweat break out on his back. The Indian's words made his heart

contract. And it wasn't about the meaning or the intonation. Something invisible touched Randall's chest. For a moment, he saw a forgotten scene from his first encounter with the savages. Before him arose the powerful figure in a bear mask, and the arrowhead in a taut, drawn bow. The vision vanished after a second, but the sensation of fear before something vast and incomprehensible continued to hang in the air.

«Pray before you decide on something,» the Bear said quietly. «Ask the Great Spirit to open your eyes and give you the strength of mind, so that you may become like the Spirit of all living things. Then you will be able to walk firmly...»

The Bear never brought up the topic again, although he often dropped by Randall's tent to ask about Maggie's well-being and just to sit.

Closer to summer, Randall gathered some of his things and told his wife he was going to the fort. As always, he explained nothing and promised nothing. Like most trappers, he called the Indian woman his woman, but considered himself not her man, but a free person. He left when he wanted and returned only when circumstances brought him back to his wife's tribe.

The village also broke camp, split into separate groups, and dispersed across the plains, searching for buffalo herds. The winter supplies of dried meat were exhausted; a long hunt lay ahead.

For almost a month, Randall Scott wandered around the Black Hills, looking for traces of gold dust. Here and there he stayed for a long time, clumsily panning soil, but the results were so insignificant that the collected gold was only enough for a few glasses of whiskey. At times, he found small gold nuggets. But it was all accidental. He did not find a true gold-bearing site. It was still easier for him to set traps and earn money that way. But life had changed greatly. There was noticeably less fur-bearing game.

Every time he appeared at the fort on the banks of the Laramie, he went to a small building near which excited soldiers constantly buzzed and the laughter of women could be heard, sitting on creaky old chairs in front of the door. These pomaded ladies had arrived specifically to entertain the soldiers, having correctly calculated that in such a remote place, men would have an insatiable appetite for female flesh, and they would have the opportunity to satisfy this soldierly hunger and earn money from it. The Lakota living near the fort watched with interest the strange relationships

between men and women, which they had not encountered before.

«The Blue Coats have no families,» the Indians marveled. «The Pale-Faced soldiers must not know how to make a family. They only know how to copulate with women. These are common women. Many men sleep with each of them. But these women don't bear children. So where do so many Blue Coats come from?»

Of all the prostitutes living near the fort, Randall only liked the red-haired Magnolia. In her bed, on a striped mattress torn in two places, he found something he had encountered neither in St. Louis nor in the Indian village. Magnolia also showed signs of affection for Randall, but she still took his money, though she worked for them with particular diligence and even passion.

«I'd gladly become your wife, Scott,» she told him one day, «but you don't have a cent to your name. You blow all your savings every time you come here. And why the devil should I go with a man without means? You have an excellent member and a good face, but that's not enough for me. No, my dear, I've decided. I'm going to Oregon, it's full of successful gold prospectors there now, new towns, prosperity...»

She lay on her back, shamelessly spreading her legs, and stroked the inside of her thighs with one hand, while with the other she caressed Randall's manhood.

«Soon I'll find gold in the Black Hills,» he replied. «I've wasted a ton of time on it. Now I won't give up. I will have gold.»

«If that happens, don't forget to let me know and call for me. I swear, you won't have to beg me. But only if we're talking about real gold, not empty words, my dear,» she laughed and pressed her mouth to his groin.

«I don't understand why you need money,» he muttered. «You'll spend it all on lipstick, powder, and garters for your stockings. You'll probably buy all sorts of trinkets. In a few days, you'll have nothing left.»

«Don't worry about my future expenses,» Magnolia said, detaching herself from him.

«I don't understand why you women love trinkets so much. You can be bought outright for rings, earrings, and rags.»

«What's so bad about that?»

«Nothing. It's just that you're no different from the savages. You all call yourselves civilized people and look at the Indians with contempt. But in reality, you are exactly the same savages; you love knick-knacks and

rattles, paint your faces, decorate your dresses with frills, bows, ribbons, fringe. It's funny...»

«Besides, darling,» the prostitute looked him straight in the eye, «we, just like the savages, spread our legs, and you shove your members into us. Yes, we are savages. Only personally, I want to be a clean, well-washed, and nice-smelling savage. Do you understand that, my dear? And I want my house to be cozy and not filled with smoke from a sooty stove like this one. I want comforts, coziness, and your savages want nothing but a full belly and a pile of stinking hides...»

In the autumn, the prostitutes loaded into a wagon and rode off, joining some очередной caravan, and the soldiers plunged back into gloomy drunkenness.

THE BLACK ROBE

The rider was dressed in a badly worn black robe, patched in many places and tied with a horsehair rope. Judging by his attire, he belonged to the Jesuit order. However, on his head sat a brown, decidedly non-monastic hat with drooping wide brims — he must have lost his own somewhere. His outfit was soaked through from the recent rain and hadn't had time to dry yet, its damp folds hanging heavily on the rider's lanky frame. The coarse cloth clung to the Jesuit's thin, hairy legs, and Randall saw the missionary's sharp knees and beautifully embroidered moccasins, which tightly encased his feet, under the hitched-up robe.

After dismounting from a gray Indian mare, the priest strode decisively towards Randall and extended a thin hand for a handshake. The sight of the slender wrist evoked a feeling of pity in Randall. The Jesuit resembled a helpless reed. He was no more than thirty years old. A sparse, light beard covered his sunken cheeks.

«Griet,» he introduced himself with a broad smile. «Very glad to see a white man in this wilderness. Are you looking at my footwear? Fine work! A gift from the Blackfeet. A woman named Small Stones sewed three pairs specifically for me… May the Lord grant her happiness for the generosity of her heart! Unfortunately, I've already worn out two pairs… Forgive me, I talk too much, I've grown unaccustomed to the company of white people… I didn't catch your name…»

«My name is Randall Scott. Sit by the fire, I just made coffee. I always make good coffee. But my biscuits are usually lousy, either undercooked or too dry.»

«I would gladly swallow even the hardest of hardtack,» Griet said, adjusting the long skirts of his cloak before squatting down and untying a tin mug from his belt. «I haven't eaten today, and the mere sight of your biscuits is enough to make my stomach sing psalms.»

«Are you traveling far, Father?» Scott poured the fragrant drink into the offered mug and smirked at the word «Father,» which he, a fifty-year-old man, had used to address a young man.

«I wander from one tribe to another. My road, being rather winding, is endless. Lately, I've been living with the Blackfeet, in the Short Shirts clan.»

«Trying to convert the savages to the true faith?»

«Trying,» sighed the priest. «Not always, of course, do I have enough humble zeal. I have to constantly turn to the Lord for help and to the example of my elder brothers, whose righteous labors yield wondrous results.»

Having lived almost twenty years in the Far West, Randall Scott had never met a single missionary, though he had heard many different stories about them. A legendary figure was the Jesuit De Smet, who knew all the Plains tribes well and got along with everyone. The Indians regarded him, if not with love, then with boundless trust. He, trying not to pressure the natives lest he scare them off with excessive persistence, nevertheless never missed a chance to say a Christian prayer in their presence. When warriors returned from a raid, he would invariably walk through the camp, ringing a bell attached to his belt, summoning the savages to his tent to appeal to Jesus and thank Him for the men's safe return from the warpath. De Smet often acted as a mediator between government officials and the red-skinned inhabitants of the prairies, and there seemed to be no task beyond his abilities.

«By God's grace, I will carry out any mission entrusted to me,» he would say, smiling modestly and showing his large front teeth, for which the Indians had nicknamed him Long Teeth.

Randall had heard from the Lakota about De Smet's amazing spiritual qualities, and now, engaged in a leisurely conversation with Griet and studying him curiously, he involuntarily tried to endow him with all the attributes of Father De Smet.

Griet was remarkably thin. When he stretched out his arms, they, pale and slender, protruding from the tattered wide sleeves, reminded Randall of tree branches stripped clean of their bark. These hands lacked the strength to carry heavy loads, chop wood, or skin animal carcasses. It seemed difficult to handle a horse with such hands. And yet, this thirty-year-old priest, resembling a dreamy boy, lived on the prairie and was not afraid to move from place to place completely alone, carrying no weapons. How did he manage to survive in such a wild land? How did he manage to find a common language with the Indians?

«It is very difficult to teach the savages to rest on the seventh day,»

Griet recounted, scratching his sparse beard. «These children of nature do not understand why one should have a day of rest, why one should not go hunting or scrape hides on Sunday. I always hold a Sunday service, but unfortunately, it's not always possible to gather a sufficient number of Indians for the service. Although, I tell you, for the most part, they respect my sermons, even if they do not agree to be baptized. In a word, one has to sweat…»

«So, not without problems,» Scott said, half-questioning, half-concluding.

«Yes. Various things have happened… I wasn't well received everywhere. For example, when I came to the Gros Ventres, they beat me and stripped me. A woman took my cassock for herself. Do you see several elk teeth sewn on the back? She decided to turn my garment into a dress for herself and had already started decorating it in her own fashion. They forced me to wear leggings and a shirt made of skin. This is a terrible sin for me. I am not allowed to remove my clothing.»

«But I see you got it back nonetheless.»

«I did, but not immediately. Before the Gros Ventres, I lived with the Blackfeet, and I had many good friends there. I was so upset by the reception the Gros Ventres gave me that I couldn't control my feelings and hurried away from them back to the Blackfeet. You know, it's not so easy to offend me. Education in a Jesuit school involves not only severe physical punishments for misdemeanors but also teaches us to endure the most terrible humiliations. Nothing can surprise us.»

«Really, nothing?» Scott doubted.

«Perhaps you are unaware, my friend, but Jesuits are obliged not only to patiently endure sufferings inflicted by others but also to flagellate themselves for unrighteous thoughts. I have had to whip myself with thorns more than once for starting to think, for example, about women… I punished myself personally, and for that, you must agree, one must be sufficiently honest with oneself… So, bruises don't frighten me…»

«You, it seems to me, can match the redskins in patience.»

«Yes, the savages know how to endure pain. All those bloody Sun Dances and other barbaric rituals…»

«So what happened to you next? Well, after the Gros Ventres showed you their hospitality?»

«To tell the truth, I became very angry and promised my offenders that

God would punish them soon... Forgive me, Lord, for my lack of restraint... It happened in spring, and at the end of summer, I met the Gros Ventres again. It happened like this...» Griet fell silent for a while and covered his eyes with his slender fingers, as if trying to resurrect the memories of those days. «Several young men went off to hunt antelope. I believe it was Left Hand, Yellow Bird, Torn Ear, but the names aren't the point... They were attacked by a war party of Gros Ventres, and only Left Hand managed to escape death. The Blackfeet immediately began gathering people to take revenge on the enemy. But I talked them out of it, although, believe me, stopping enraged men is not easy. Yet I convinced them not to go on the warpath. The Gros Ventres were surprised that no one pursued them and took it for cowardice on the part of the Blackfeet. A couple of days later, five of their men sneaked into our camp at dawn. A thick fog was standing, and it played into their hands. They hoped to steal horses from our camp. But the Lord decreed otherwise. At the very moment the horse thieves began untying the horses, the fog suddenly lifted, and the thieves were exposed to the entire village. The Blackfeet killed them immediately, as soon as they were discovered. But again I persuaded them to restrain their anger and not pursue those enemies who were outside the village. The Gros Ventres again did not believe in the nobility of the Blackfeet. They naively believed that our village was inhabited by cowardly people. But God punished them for excessive self-confidence. They attacked us a couple of days later, approaching our camp with a large party. They rode, filling the air with terrible songs and cries. Many held little mirrors in their hands, sending sun flashes in our direction, showing their contempt for us. Faces thickly painted with bright colors. Hair either standing on end above the forehead, or straight-combed, or braided. Bodies smeared with fat. It was terrible.»

«I know what a war party of redskins is like,» Scott grunted, «you can skip the details. Let me have your mug, I'll pour you more coffee, though it's mostly grounds now...»

«The Gros Ventres hoped for a swift victory, expecting to only kill fleeing people,» Griet continued. «But this time, not only did I not restrain my friends, but I even rode out with them onto the battlefield, addressing the Lord with loud speeches and praying for His assistance. In my hand, I held a cross with the holy crucifix. I think it was a strange sight, for I was dressed in an Indian shirt and a loincloth. I was distinguished from them

only by my beard and the absence of weapons. The cross in my hand and my prayers were my only weapons… I believed that the Blackfeet had shown sufficient patience and obedience by not responding with cruel revenge to the previous enemy attacks. Now I prayed that heaven would reward them for their obedience. And the Lord heard my prayers. The Gros Ventres were defeated; many of them fell in that battle, many fled. And their chief, Blue Bowstring, hid in the bushes like the most wretched coward. The Blackfeet mocked him for a long time but spared his life and drove him away, smearing him from head to toe with dog excrement. This shame will remain with Blue Bowstring until the end of his days. However, the Gros Ventres saw me and concluded that I was the cause of their defeat, remembering that I had promised them a terrible punishment for the insult inflicted upon me. Soon they sent peaceful emissaries to our camp and smoked the pipe with the Blackfeet chiefs and with me. The emissaries brought me my cassock, taken from me by the Gros Ventres. I decided not to remove the elk teeth sewn onto it, as a memory of all that had happened. They apologized for a long time, but I was no longer angry with them, for the Lord had sent them a terrible punishment, perhaps even more severe than I could have expected.»

«Do you believe that was God's punishment, Father?» Randall looked intently at the missionary.

«And you think I am mistaken?» Griet replied with an equally intent gaze.

«It's just war. Sometimes luck favors one side, sometimes the other. We are pursued by the most amazing coincidences.»

«Coincidence? My friend, there are no coincidences. Coincidence is the will of the Lord, hidden from human eyes,» the Jesuit said confidently.

«I won't argue, sometimes it seems that a man is overtaken by retribution for vile deeds. And yet… In a word, I don't know… But I envy you, your faith, Holy Father…»

«Man is accustomed to considering himself the master of his own destiny. That is his misfortune. No, of course, I do not urge anyone to sit idly by and wait for manna from heaven. But I firmly know that all your efforts will yield no result if you wish to do something contrary to God's will. I have met many people who took up arms to carry out vengeance. Such people naively believe they are capable of dispensing judgment. In reality, they succeed in punishing offenders only if it is the Lord's will.

They, however, believe they did it all themselves… And many have even more terrible thoughts. I knew a man who, despite his youth, had been in many terrible battles. There is nothing more dreadful than a mercenary soldier… This Jacques Vernier, whom I speak of, was my friend from early childhood, but we took different paths. He is French by birth but served in the English army and completely lost his sense of homeland. I too know no homeland; I live too far from my father's house, but I do not grieve. The earth is a common home for all of us, even if we differ from one another. The Lord settled us on this planet, taught us to move from place to place so that we might communicate, exchange the dissimilar aspects of our cultures, and learn about each other… So, this Jacques of mine had become so accustomed to killing people with saber and bullet that he very quickly ceased to perceive a person as a person. Every living being became in his eyes simply a piece of meat. He completely lost the sense of another's life because he could end that life with a wave of his hand. Killing became such a simple and natural matter for Jacques that he resorted to it every time someone contradicted him in anything. Just imagine: if he dislikes something in your thoughts, he doesn't trouble himself with the slightest effort to convince you; he simply draws a pistol and pierces your heart with a bullet. That's the whole argument. Anyone who contradicts him seems to him an obstacle that he sweeps away without hesitation. For him, another's point of view, contradicting his own, simply has no right to exist. It's terrible… Once he came to visit home, and I happened to be there at the same time. That is how I learned his views on life. Jacques was sincerely happy to see me, although my cassock puzzled him greatly. We talked for a long time, reminiscing about our childhood. But what despair seized him when he suddenly discovered that my thoughts radically differed from his ideas! He jumped up, showered me with curses, and was ready to tear my head off. But he didn't do it. He suddenly fell face down on the table. The Lord deprived him of his strength. Jacques wept for a long time, unable to explain his feelings. I — once his closest friend — ceased to be his friend the moment I began to contradict Jacques. Another's life for him is nothing. He sees no weight, no value in it. He is accustomed to destroying it as soon as it becomes the slightest obstacle in his path. Do you understand, Scott, what I'm talking about?»

«I think I do,» Randall nodded.

«Life is unnecessary to Jacques if it contradicts him, if it resists him.

What could be more terrible? It's a complete absence of love! A complete rejection of God! You say there is no faith in your heart. You are mistaken. You are filled with thousands of feelings; you are capable of being aware of them; you are capable of sharing them. But Jacques, my unfortunate Jacques Vernier, is deprived of this. He accepts nothing… You can come to God, at least you can open your heart a little, but he cannot. He is devoid of love. He considers himself a judge who rules the world.»

«What became of him now?»

«I suppose he perished somewhere. I haven't seen him since that day, but I have prayed for his soul many times.»

«Listen, Father.» Randall took Griet by the elbow. To his surprise, he suddenly realized that he was no longer at all embarrassed to call the Jesuit «Father.» In this thin and weak-looking man, he saw something special, powerful, unshakable. «I had a friend nicknamed Jack-Dog. He died; old age wore him down. Let me show you his grave. He was buried according to all Indian rules, he was given high honors. But no Christian word was spoken over him. I don't know if he was a Christian. We are all savages here, regardless of our faith. However, I'd bet my hand that Jack-Dog was a real man. I never saw him angry. I don't know if he needs a good prayer, damn it… forgive me, Father.» Randall slapped his own lips. «Perhaps you wouldn't refuse this request of mine, Father. It's not far, three days' journey. We could even gather his bones and bury them in the ground, as is proper… If, of course, we find the bones… Coyotes, you know, get everywhere…»

«Of course. I am ready to go to your friend even now,» the Jesuit replied readily. «But I would like to dry off a bit by the fire.»

«Yes, yes, there's no hurry,» Randall agreed. «By the way, what do the Indians call you, Father?»

«I used to be Black Robe,» the Jesuit replied, «the savages call almost all missionaries that. But after that battle where I rode with the warriors, holding the crucifix in my hand, the Blackfeet named me Cross In Front.»

TATANKA HANSKA

His Story as translated by Winthrop Haley

Along the Shell River, there was a trail constantly traveled by white people. In those years, they had become very numerous. They moved in tents set on wheels and drove with them horses with long ears and buffalo of a strange appearance and color. The grass that our horses used to feed on was trampled down in those areas and eaten by their spotted buffalo. These settlers cut down the forests there and shot all the game.

We never expected that anyone could so alter the appearance of our land. But at that time, we did not realize that this was only the beginning. By that time, we had long called the white people *Wasíchu*. You ask what it means? *Washín* (wašiŋ) is the scum that forms on the surface of boiling soup. Those who try to be the first to skim off this scum are the *Wasíchu*. The white people took the best of everything that crossed their path.

The soldiers settled in Fort Laramie, where we used to trade with white hunters, and built another town for themselves on the bank of the Shell River near a large island. We were no longer afraid of the soldiers, as they weren't fighting us at all. They had only frightened us when they first came to our land because we had never seen the kind of weapons they brought on wheels.

When we grew tired of the constant presence of white people on the road along the Shell River, we gathered a large party and decided to show everyone in that territory who its true master was. Many of the Crow joined the Lakota because we had long been friends with them.

We set up camp not far from the soldiers' town so they could see our strength. It was a large war camp. Much later I heard talk that only armed men were in that camp, but that is not true. There were women with us, though very few, no more than ten per hundred warriors; the women handled the food preparation. If the party had been small, the warriors could have managed on their own, but there were too many of us; we even brought our tipis with us, we needed women's hands. It is commonly

thought that women do not go on campaigns with men. That is correct. But in almost every warrior society, there is a young woman whom all members of that society call sister. She sometimes goes on war parties with the men. It was such sisters that we invited with us, to look after our clothing, shelter, and food. They had many concerns.

We attacked a village of the Wolf people and beat them soundly. I remember how one boy, who did not belong to any warrior society because he was too young and had followed our large party in secret, during the attack on the Wolf village, charged ahead on his horse and struck two enemies who ran out to meet him with a long stick. His horse was killed under him, and he fell to the ground. But the next instant, he was on his feet and running forward. He was shot near the first house of the Wolves, as he tried to burst inside. That boy very much wanted to become a glorious warrior, but he was in too much of a hurry. His name was Cut Finger. We left his body in a tipi, and I hung my shield in front of the entrance to guard the boy from evil people and evil spirits. Since then, I have had no shield, but I do not grieve. I am sure the shadow of my shield helped the boy on his journey through the invisible world.

After that, our warriors stopped a train of white people heading towards the soldiers, carrying weapons and ammunition for them. It was a very quick fight; none of our people were killed, and every *Wasichu* acted like a cowardly dog and tucked his tail. We took everything from them and rode away. That evening, when we counted our coups from that encounter, we counted many touches against the Pale-Faces. We felt very pleased because we had suffered no losses and had managed to prove our strength to the *Wasichu*.

But our joy was not long-lasting. A calamity came upon us that no one had expected.

We had often seen dead people whom the Pale-Faces left lying along the road, and we had come across graves where they placed their dead. Some Lakota took clothing from these corpses, not suspecting that a terrible sickness was hidden within it.

It struck us more treacherously than any enemy who attacks from behind. And we did not know how to fight this sickness. Many people faded away before our eyes; their faces turned black, their hands and legs shook. Sometimes a healthy man would die in two days.

We fled from that place, deciding to hide in the villages of our northern

relatives. But some of our medicine men ordered us not to meet with anyone, saying we would bring the sickness to them and kill them.

We broke up into small groups and began to wait.

My two wives died at the first stopping place. I could not give them the proper send-off to the Spirit World because I could no longer walk myself. My children had died even earlier on the journey.

As we traveled, we left the dead lying in the tipis. Sometimes we put ten people into one lodge. And then we would set off again. But a moment came when our group stopped.

There were two wise men among us — Long Horse and Strange Bear. They made all of us move far apart from each other, so the sick would not come into contact with the healthy. Long Horse rode across the plains collecting buffalo skulls. Then he placed them in front of the entrances to the lodges where the sick or dead lay. Buffalo are the strongest creatures on earth. The spirit of their tribe can protect against any misfortune if asked correctly. Long Horse positioned the bull skulls so they would not let the sickness out of the tipi where it had entered. Strange Bear sat outside the camp and prayed. Everyone knew he possessed great power, but he said the Spirits of our land were not familiar with the enemy that had descended upon us; they did not know the language spoken by the terrible sickness; they needed time.

«We must pray and wait,» Bear said then.

Among us was a very brave warrior named Red Fox. Realizing he was dying, he gathered his last strength and came out of his tipi in full battle regalia. He began a sacred song and stood in front of his dwelling, leaning on his spear. He addressed the Evil Spirits, demanding that they appear before him and fight an honest battle. He was so weak that he fell before finishing the song. Someone started towards him to help, but Bear drove them away, threatening with his rifle.

So died Red Fox, defending his family, but his relatives did not survive anyway.

Black Shield, Spotted Cap, Strong Arm, He Who Fears Eagles, The One Who Hides, Long Nose, Short Hair — they were all strong and brave young warriors, but they died. There were fifty people in our band, and twenty departed for the Spirit World that autumn.

I survived, but for a long time after that I felt weak and did not go on war parties.

Walking Fox, Bear's wife, also recovered. Even his daughter, Sacred Song, got back on her feet, although the sickness had attacked her before the others. But the second child born to his sister, Magaju, passed away.

THE PEACE PIPE

All summer long in 1851, Indian agents sent runners to various communities of the Lakota and the Cheyenne, summoning the Indians to a great council. The government's plans were grand, but in their path, like a century-old windfall, lay the stubbornness of the Indians.

Hearing that the white men wanted to make peace not only with the Lakota and their allies, but also wanted the Lakota to smoke the Pipe with their ancient enemies, Strange Bear was the first to begin persuading his tribesmen to go to the white man's town. He knew that the Lakota still did not grasp the might possessed by the Light-Eyed Ones. He understood that peace was as necessary for the Indians as the constant hunting of buffalo, because any show of hostility by the Lakota towards the whites threatened to escalate into a real war, the outcome of which could not favor the red men.

«Brothers, open your ears and hear me! Right now, it is pride speaking in you, not reason. I cannot force anyone to speak kind words if they thirst for revenge and blood. But Wakan Tanka is good to us only as long as we are good to the world around us. If there is anger in our hearts, if we let it fall upon someone, then Wakan Tanka turns away from us and sends misfortune upon us. It comes in the form of treacherous enemies who kill the best of us and steal our women and horses, or in the form of sicknesses more terrible than any enemy. I urge you to forget hatred, to set aside your weapons, and to walk with sacred step upon the Path of Life! When we do this, the Great Spirit will smile upon us from above, as upon obedient children. When we patiently endure all hardships instead of grabbing our weapons, Wakan Tanka Himself will protect us from our enemies!» The Bear spoke fervently at every council, trying to convey his feelings to his people. They listened to him, but many shook their heads skeptically. «The Keeper of the Fire of Life possesses a power that knows no limits. Life itself is endless, we must understand this, and our fears of death will be scattered like dust. Wakan Tanka did not create people and animals so that they would die.»

One day, White Chin, who had gained popularity among the warlike youth for his reckless courage, rose after the Bear finished speaking and touched his palm to his own temple.

«I have long listened to the words of the Bear,» he said thoughtfully, «and I see that his words are full of a wisdom I am unable to comprehend. Such words cannot be spoken by an ordinary Lakota. They can only fall from the lips of a madman. I hear the speech of Crazy Bear. A normal Lakota understands that our women, children, and elders need protection. Who will shield them from enemies if we lay down our weapons? We all know how treacherous our enemies are. Shall we really agree to bury the war hatchet? Peace is a good thing. But when the embers of the council fire grow cold and we ride off in different directions, what will we do? How will we live if we stop fighting? What will our women think of us? They will consider us cowardly dogs, afraid to test ourselves on the battlefield. No, I will not go to talk of peace with the Snakes. I will smoke the pipe with Blue Cloud and with Those-Who-Speak-a-Foreign-Tongue, because they are our friends.» The young man paused thoughtfully and added, «Friendship and peace are good. But the Bear wants us to bury the war hatchet forever. He is crazy…»

After this, the name Matȟó Witkó, meaning Crazy Bear, stuck to him by itself. No one wished to insult him, for the Lakota believed that every true sage and every holy man was a little abnormal, as his mind was structured differently from everyone else's.

Until now, most tribesmen had simply considered him strange, unable to explain many of the Bear's actions. Few had heard his speeches, because he did not participate in councils, which seemed to push him into the shadows, drawing no attention to him. Now he had spoken, and the thoughts crowded in his head had spilled out, making him seem even stranger in people's eyes. The Lakota realized that the Bear's words had weight, but his tribesmen could not accept them.

That summer he turned forty-one. He was still as strong and agile as a true warrior should be. He was as wise as a holy man should be. He was never pushy, which made him stand out strongly among his tribesmen, as they always vehemently defended their views, quickly became excited, easily accused one another, and quarreled, unwilling to consider others' opinions. Matȟó Witkó more often remained a calm observer, even when present at warrior society meetings. Some hidden force would cover his

mouth with a commanding hand when he occasionally wanted to rise and angrily interrupt someone's heated speech, amazed at the foolishness of the speaker's words. An invisible mentor would wait until the Bear's heart calmed down, then release him, after which he would speak one or two phrases in a calm voice and sink back into silence.

But then an event occurred after which the community decided to follow his advice.

One day, after another gathering, the Bear went off to fast and conduct a ceremony unknown to anyone, away from the camp. Many heard him singing a strange wordless song, and later someone claimed it was the same song that had been heard from the mountain on the day his daughter was born. He did not return to the village for two days. On the third day, early in the morning when the grass still lay half-flat under the weight of heavy dew, the Bear silently entered the center of the camp circle with a drum in his hands and stood there motionless for a long time. He was completely naked, his long hair loose over his shoulders and back, even falling over his face. When he suddenly began to sing loudly to the sound of the drum, people in the nearest tipis fearfully stuck their heads out. Later, they told others that they had seen vague shadows, like terrible twisted logs with monstrous branch-like limbs splayed in all directions, looming before the entrance of every lodge. But the Bear's song dispersed these shadows. By the time the whole camp was awake, the Indians had gathered in a tight ring around the singing Matȟó Witkó.

«The people will not understand, the people will not understand,» he chanted in a strange voice.

His eyes were closed as if he were asleep, his bare feet lightly stamping. The women at first whispered and giggled, pointing at Crazy Bear's uncovered male nakedness, but soon the cheerful mood left the crowd.

«Witkó, witkó,» came occasionally from the crowd, «he has lost his mind.»

Completely unexpectedly, someone in the back rows exclaimed:

«Bull!»

The women scattered, seeing a huge bison with a massive head and large horns caked with clumps of earth and long blades of grass. The men rushed for their weapons. The bull was charging straight for the Indian settlement, as if blinded by rage. The thud of its hooves echoed loudly, and

the very earth seemed to shudder under its weight.

Crazy Bear was left alone among the tipis. He broke off his mournful song and spread his arms wide. His eyes remained closed, his hair stirring lazily in the wind.

He took a step forward, and the ferocious bull suddenly slowed its run and stopped before the Indian at arm's length. The cries that had begun to rise from all sides fell away like spray from a wave crashing against a rock. A deep silence hung.

The spectacle was so astonishing that no one dared even to breathe loudly.

The bison was covered in long, dirty hair hanging from its belly almost to the ground. It stood before the lone figure of the naked savage and did not move. The Indian also did not stir. He looked utterly helpless before the hump-backed giant, and the nakedness of his wiry body against the almost black fur of the bull heightened this impression. The fragile human figure, without making any movement, held the mighty animal in place with some unknown force.

Then, as if something pushed Crazy Bear, he struck the drum again. The bison slowly turned and walked away from the camp.

None of the Lakota dared to approach Crazy Bear immediately, and he kept beating and beating the resonant, humming skin of the drum. And suddenly he fell. His hair splayed across the ground, his eyes opened and fixed on the high sky, already pierced by the morning sun's radiance.

He was carried to his tipi, and there he regained consciousness. Walking Fox made everyone leave, and no one knew what happened next inside. But by noon, the Bear came out. His hair was combed with a straight part and tied into braids at the temples, as befitted a true Lakota. His long shirt of soft deerskin was adorned only with fringe; the light-brown leggings and moccasins also had no embroidery. This was the old Bear, as his tribesmen were used to seeing him.

No one ever found out what had happened to Crazy Bear, or whether he himself remembered what had occurred.

That same evening, at a gathering of the warrior societies, it was decided to go to Fort Laramie, where the runners had summoned them.

«Mató Witkó cannot wish ill upon his people. Clearly, he knows something that we all do not suspect. Powerful spirits are always near him. We will go to the white soldiers' town and listen to what they have to say

to us. We can always fold our tipis and leave them if we decide this talk is not for us…»

Near the fort, they found many other Lakota. Huge herds grazed all along the riverbank, raising dust. The air was filled with the voices of thousands of Indians gathered for the negotiations. The enormous camp buzzed, greeting the newcomers.

That same day, runners appeared with news of a large party of Shoshone approaching. The Lakota grew agitated and rode their shaggy horses impatiently before the walls of the fort made of unburned brick. Seeing the excitement of the savages, traders began to emerge from the houses built outside the fortress walls. The women raised a heart-rending wail, mourning their husbands and brothers killed in the war with the Shoshone. Soldiers, buttoning their uniforms on the run, hurried towards the noise to see how events would unfold.

The Shoshone appeared from behind the crest of a hill, strung out in a long line. They rode beautiful horses and were well-armed. In front rode men in ceremonial dress, holding rifles at the ready. Behind them came women with children, and following them, more warriors for protection. There were about two hundred of them in total. Riding next to the lead horseman was a white hunter, looking around with the same wariness as his red-skinned companions. It was Jim Bridger, who had taken upon himself the burden of being a guide and a kind of guarantor of the Shoshone's safety in the territory of their hostile Lakota enemies.

The column approached the valley, dotted with Indian dwellings, in complete silence. Watching these still-distant riders who had come into the very heart of the Lakota country, the Bear remembered himself in the trading camp on the banks of the Green River. He too had seen a multitude of enemies before him, watching him with predatory eyes. But he had been alone in the land of the Snakes. The Shoshone had come here with a strong party.

Suddenly, from the dense crowd of Lakota, a young Indian burst out with a cry and, furiously whipping his horse, rushed towards the halted Shoshone. In his left hand were a bow and an arrow. Following him, a man in a leather jacket (an interpreter, as it turned out later) spurred his bay stallion. He caught up with the savage about a hundred meters from the frozen line of riders, who had prepared for battle, and, grabbing the heated youth by the hair, dragged him off his horse by his braids. He shouted

something at the Indian thrown to the ground, gesturing quickly and pointing at the frozen Shoshone. Whether it was his words or the rifle barrels aimed at him that convinced the savage, he jumped back on his horse and rode back with a sullen face. Firearms among the Lakota were still a rarity in those days. For every hundred warriors, there were at most two or three guns.

By noon, the superintendent ordered all the gathered communities to take down their tipis and move to Horse Creek, as the huge Indian herds had trampled all the grass around the fort. What appeared a little later to an outside observer was one of the most extraordinary processions in the entire history of the Far West. The grand cavalcade was led by two detachments of soldiers, above which the American flag lazily fluttered. Behind them rolled wagons carrying government officials, who sneezed in the murky clouds of dust. Next rumbled wagons with various supplies. Behind, stretching for almost two miles, was a column of Indians. The military leaders were in full regalia, wearing their brightest outfits, their faces painted, their heads adorned with magnificent warbonnets. In their hands were lances hung with wolf skins and feathers, sacred society staffs with rattlesnake skin and bird effigies, magic drums... The men moved in complete silence and looked calm, but all clutched their weapons, ready at any second to fan out and charge their enemies. The women wrapped themselves in embroidered, colorful blankets and hides. They kept glancing back at the travois scraping along the ground, where the smallest children were settled. Here and there were dogs with a wolf-like appearance; they looked no less proud than their owners, and some, like the ponies, also pulled small travois with belongings.

The next day, the tension eased. Delegations of Indians went from one camp to another, offering to smoke the pipe with each other. Officials in black clothes sat at a table under a stretched awning, explaining things to the chiefs through interpreters, proving something, persuading, insisting. Indian orators spoke calmly, gesturing expressively and modulating their voices like professional actors on a theater stage.

In the evening, a feast was being prepared in the Lakota camp. The frames of two of the tallest tipis were placed close together, and on one side, hides were stretched over the poles, forming a rather spacious covered semicircle where, as under a canopy, almost a hundred and fifty of the most important warriors had gathered. Shoshone and Psaloki sat

side by side with Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. A dozen pots stood before the Indians seated in a circle, and aromatic steam rose from them.

«Brothers,» one of the Lakota chiefs rose, stretching his hands towards the assembly. «We have gathered here to show our goodwill. This land belongs to our people, but we want you to feel at ease and carefree here, because you are our guests. We want you to know that our hearts are open to friendship and kind words. We have killed our best dogs today, which served us faithfully, killed specially for this meeting, to feed you well. We spare nothing, because we wish to show our kindness…»

Sitting with the red men before the fire, listening to the chiefs' long speeches, were old trappers, smirking and skeptical. They had long since studied Indian ways. Jim Bridger had settled a little apart, pulling his fur cap with its stiff leather visor down over his eyes. From the gloom of the thickening night, a shadow in a military uniform with gleaming buttons moved towards him and sat down.

«What do you think, Jim? Will they be able to calm down and live peacefully? That would take a lot of unnecessary worries off our shoulders…»

«Redskins are like two vicious dogs,» the hunter muttered, stretching. «You can pull 'em apart during a fight, sure, but let 'em go, and they'll lock right back up.»

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

The great council at Horse Creek was a strange affair. Many bands of Lakota came, almost six thousand warriors, and with them, their families. The Arapaho and Cheyenne were with us. And the white men had called our enemies there, the Psaloki and the Snakes. We smoked pipes and shook each other's hands. One of our women took her young son to the Snakes' camp and gave him to a chief of the Snakes to raise. That chief had killed the boy's father in battle; now he had to replace the dead father. It even began to seem to me that we, who had been enemies for so long, had managed to agree and had truly made peace — so many kind words were spoken!

There I saw Ichi-Mawani. He seemed to me to have aged greatly. Ichi-Mawani was beardless, and the hair on his head had grown thin, especially on the crown where Indians take scalps. I did not see the former strength in his eyes. He looked the way our people looked when they were struck down by the terrible smallpox. I remember that look.

He came to our camp and stayed near his wife almost the entire time the negotiations lasted. For a very long time, he talked with Moonlight, but I did not hear their conversation. Moonlight was thirteen winters old, already a grown boy, and he spoke with his father as befits a man. That was the last time he saw his father, and he remembered him just like that — beardless, with thin, short hair, graying at the temples.

When I asked Ichi-Mawani about his plans, he answered that he would go to the Black Hills because he had found a place where there was gold. I did not ask him about his son, whether he would take him to the big cities of the white men, because I knew that Ichi-Mawani would not leave our country again. And I walked away from him.

A stone settled on my heart, because now many things were bound to go wrong, not as they should. One of the people had definitively stepped out of the chain where his place was allotted. He did not sit in the circle

where he was meant to sit, and the ring was broken. Trouble was brewing.

The settlers were growing more numerous with each passing day, and our people believed the newcomers were ruining the country, so it proved impossible to restrain them from military action. Everyone easily forgot the pipe they had smoked. The elders did not particularly try to dissuade the youth, and the young men began to openly show their hostility towards the *Wasichus*.

Three winters after the council at Horse Creek, our tribe, almost in full strength, was again camped not far from Fort Laramie. All the southern groups of the Titonwan had gathered in the valley: the Oglala, the Sichangu, the Miniconjou. And then one day, one of the young men shot a cow that was following behind a settlers' wagon train. The soldiers decided to punish the guilty party and came from the fort to our camp. A foolish move. They had brought a cannon with them, but there were only thirty of them. The Lakota killed them all. Those two acts became the kindling for the fire of war. The young warriors were very proud of what they had done. They simply swelled with importance and laughed at those who spoke of the soldiers' strength and the power of their weapons. The youths, burning with desire to win glory in battle, would not listen to me or others who argued for peace, and constantly raided the passing wagon trains. They did not suspect that very soon many of their own leaders would themselves bury the war hatchet.

And the next year, the Long Knives attacked Little Thunder's village, which was standing on the Blue Water. There were almost three hundred people in the camp, and about a hundred of them died. Never before had our people suffered such a defeat. All their belongings, all the stored meat, all the lodges were lost in the flight; all the horses fell into the soldiers' hands; almost a hundred women and children were taken captive.

The white people are incapable of understanding what that fight meant for the Lakota, who in all their history had never once had a large camp captured by enemies! Try to imagine, my friend, what our people must have felt, people for whom the loss of a few horses was considered a great sorrow, the loss of two or three warriors in battle a greatest tragedy! Now a large village was destroyed, the people scattered in different directions, hiding from their pursuers, with no weapons for defense, no roof over their heads. And it was already autumn.

I was not in Little Thunder's village when this disaster happened. But

I could not help but tell you about it. If my words were only the story of my life, I would not speak of it. For however many winters I have lived behind me, they would not be worth mentioning if I had lived only for myself. But even now, when it is all far behind, it pains me to remember the troubles of my people…

We were crushed. For the first time, we felt the shattering blow of an army. No one could any longer beat his chest and boast of his prowess. The white soldiers did not fight over horses, as the Lakota were accustomed to doing. They fought to kill.

But some bands of Lakota, living much farther north, had experienced nothing like this. Only stories had reached them, but words cannot compare with life itself. I have met people who could speak well and were considered very reasonable. But when it came to action, they were governed not by reason, but by feelings. And feelings often blind a person.

Two more winters passed, and the Lakota gathered in the Black Hills at the foot of Bear Mountain for a great council. Both the northern and the southern tribes were here. All the Titonwan had come to decide what we should do. The majority leaned towards war. But no matter how much our warlike youths wanted to stop the invasion of the White-Faced ones, they spent more time in heated arguments, inflaming themselves with loud phrases. They wanted to be heroes and forgot that they were destined to disappear, whether in battle or from old age. But the land on which they walked would remain and would not change. The hotheads thought of their own glory, of their important position in their native tribe. Each of them had their own concerns. Each person, each band, each tribal group. Our people failed to come together and become a single force. All the communities existed separately. Each had its own interests.

We have a story about how we came to possess the sacred pipe that the white men call the Peace Pipe. It happened so long ago that no one can say when.

Once, two Lakota went out to scout for buffalo and climbed a high mountain. From there, they saw a lone woman walking among the hills. They went to meet her, and as they drew near, they understood that she belonged to a tribe unknown to them. The woman was very beautiful, so beautiful that the sight of her made one's head spin and took one's breath away. Even from a great distance, a wonderful fragrance came from the woman. One of the Lakota felt a strong attraction to her and thought

to take her for himself. But the second one stopped him and said:

«Look at her carefully. This is *Wakan Win*, a sacred woman. Do not do wrong. Think of the Great Mystery…»

She stopped before the men and said:

«I see that one of you desires greatly to lie with me. But know that this cannot be done, for I am not flesh, but the spirit of flesh. I have come on important business, and now is not the time for pleasures. Learn to restrain your impulses. He who touches me will perish immediately.»

But the lustful Lakota still started towards her. He understood that the woman was defenseless against his muscular arms. However, as soon as he approached her, a thick white cloud descended from the sky and covered him. And a moment later it rose again, and all that remained of the impatient man was a skeleton teeming with worms. Those worms are our desires and greed. They live within us and eat away at our spirit.

«Now we will go to your people, and I will speak with the chief,» the woman said to the remaining Lakota, and they set off for his village.

There, she handed the chief a bundle and explained:

«Here lies something very important for you, a sacred object through which your words will reach the ears of the Great Spirit.» She unfolded the soft hide and showed the people a pipe. «This is the Sacred Pipe. Smoking it with an enemy, you promise him never to raise a hand against him. Having sworn any oath with the Pipe in your hands, you cannot go back on your words under any circumstances, or you will face destruction…»

Thus the Lakota received the Pipe.

When we smoked it during the great negotiations at Horse Creek, we pledged not to fight, but we forgot about it immediately. And yet, nothing can be hidden from the Creator.

RANDALL SCOTT

From the diary

August 20, 1861

Today, I turned sixty-four years old. Everything tells me it's time to prepare for the next world, yet I keep on washing for gold, which I feel I will never need. I am a strange man. For many years I strived for something I no longer need. I have grown old; there is not a drop of joy left in me. What do I need this gold for? I put it in little bags and keep it under the head of my bunk. For several years now, I have been watching all my companions with suspicion: lest they take what belongs to me, lest they cheat me, lest they suddenly decide to just hit me on my bald head.

I am sixty-four. For twenty-eight years I have roamed this land, fought, sometimes almost died from wounds and hunger. I have killed animals and men. I have cut down forests, built forts, erected dams on rivers. And for a good ten years now, I have been burrowing in the earth like a mole, picking out little gold nuggets which I once believed were the key to happiness.

There was a time when I gave up cards, but I did not renounce the game. When it comes to gold, I am now a big winner. I have enough gold to buy a big house and hire servants, but I have no need for such a house. I care nothing for Persian rugs, fancy furniture, or beautiful women. I want to live in the forest and breathe the smoke of a campfire, as in the days of Jack-Dog.

So it turns out I have actually lost.

Mato once told me that I could not possess gold, that I would never have it. It lies there under my head. It belongs to me. But in truth, I do not have it, because it is of no use to me.

I have nothing at all, except for the years I've lived. My heart is cold. Cold and empty. And that means Mato was right.

I feel sick at heart.

September 1, 1861

Another war party of Lakota passed nearby today. They are increasingly attacking isolated houses. I think they will soon reach our den too.

September 2

Two miles from our camp, I came across the corpse of a white man. He was stripped naked and badly cut up with a knife. It seems he was finished off by some lone warrior. Had it been a war party, the savages would not have missed the chance to attack us or at least steal our horses. I felt sorry for this unknown fellow with his bloody scalp. He was just a few minutes short of reaching shelter. Though, he likely didn't know that our cabin was so close…

I remembered myself. I remembered those days when I walked on foot across the prairie after Keith Melbraid died, knowing nothing of these parts, without a horse, tired, and frightened. Perhaps this killed man was sent from above to remind me of something?

September 3

I dreamed today that I came to the village of the Oglala and met my Maggie there. She is as fresh as she was many years ago. She took my face in her hands and kissed me. After that, I felt extraordinarily light in my body, as if it had disappeared.

Maggie spoke words I cannot remember, but it was the best thing I have ever heard from human lips. Her voice penetrated deep into me and awakened forgotten tender feelings, if such feelings ever truly spoke within me at all.

Then, behind Maggie, appeared a figure of a bear, huge as a cliff. Its fur, as I saw, was a dense spruce forest. The bear raised a paw with human fingers and shook it at me.

I woke up with a feeling of unease. An inexplicable languor did not leave me until dawn. I felt a desire arising in me to go to my wife and son. Can it be my conscience? Or guilt? Or something else I haven't encountered before?

September 12, 1861

I pick up the pen less and less often. I don't know why I have kept this diary for so many years. Who needs these notebooks? They will rot in this wilderness along with me.

I wouldn't have made an entry today either, if not for an amazing encounter. A Jesuit, whom I met many years ago, stayed with us for two days. He is just as thin and bearded, but older. He, of course, didn't

recognize me at first, but remembered our meeting immediately when I explained it to him. It's amazing how people manage to meet again in these vast expanses of land.

He told me that since then, he had passed by the place where he and I buried Jack-Dog's bones twice (he remembered it!), and each time he stopped to say a prayer. It would be nice if he said a couple of words over my grave, too. Something tells me that I have exhausted my time to the very end.

VISITORS

As soon as the steady clop of hooves reached Randall's ears, he straightened up and furrowed his brow. The horses were quite close, but the noise of the stream still muffled their steps. In the sunlight falling through the thinning leaves, the silhouettes of several Indians suddenly became visible. Randall lunged for the Winchester leaning against the rough trunk of an old cedar and decisively worked the lever action. Raising the weapon, he whistled over his shoulder, calling for his companions.

«Don't shoot!» A stooped figure of a white man with his hands raised appeared in front of the Indians. «Don't shoot, my friend!»

Now Randall saw that a woman was riding on the last horse, and that the horse was also pulling a travois. Everything, including the complete calm of the Indians, indicated that the arrivals had no hostile intentions.

«Don't shoot!» the white man shouted again, riding up very close to Randall. He was dressed in a dirty shirt and baggy trousers that clearly weren't his. Unkempt, reddish hair flowed from his head into a shaggy beard.

«Welcome, holy father!» growled Randall Scott, setting aside the Winchester and stepping out from his cover.

«Thank you for not opening fire upon seeing us,» replied the white man and, turning to his red-skinned companions, said something to them quietly. «But why did you assume I am a priest?»

«Was I mistaken?» Randall grinned and scratched his beard with dirty fingers.

«No, you are quite right.»

«I don't know where you've put your cassock, but your face is almost unchanged. Unfortunately, I don't remember your name.»

«Paul Grie,» the visitor prompted.

«That's right! Grie!» Randall snapped his fingers.

«But how do you know me?»

«Do you remember Jack-Dog's grave?»

«You don't say… So it was you and I… What a remarkable meeting! So

many years! I am glad to see you alive and well, though noticeably older.» The Jesuit jumped to the ground, and the Indians followed his example.

«So, what about your cassock? Don't tell me you took it off?»

«How many times has my clothing been ruined! How many times have I sewn new ones! Usually the savages were to blame, but this time I was robbed by people of the same skin color as me. Can you believe it? It was a crude joke on their part. They were drunk and threw my outfit into the river, leaving me completely naked. They took my horse, my Bible, and all my belongings. I'm especially sorry about my notes, which are lost. This happened about two weeks ago. These Indians took me in and gave me some European clothes. I suppose they took these rags off dead men, because on the shirt, right here, look near the collar, there are bloodstains.»

«Must have been from someone who got their head cut off. By the way, that's a reliable cure for baldness. And as you can see, I've become quite bald,» Randall said with a crooked smile, slapping his shiny bald spot. He thought for a second, then nodded towards the Indians and asked, «Are these Cheyennes?»

Turning to them, he gestured, offering them coffee. They silently gathered at the entrance to the hut. The Indian woman, holding a red blanket wrapped around her hips, began rummaging through the bags stacked on the travois. The other prospectors arrived leisurely from the opposite bank of the stream.

«When you grabbed that Winchester, Scott, I thought my time had come to give my soul to God, damn you,» laughed one of them, stuffing a plug of chewing tobacco into his cheek. «How many times have I told myself: if I have to die, there's no better place to find — peace and beauty. But no! As soon as I saw these redskins, my knees started shaking! I guess this place just isn't right for me to make my eternal bed. Ha-ha!»

The second one approached, buttoning his pants.

«I was just about to take a leak, and then I see these devils! Riding along, their faces shining in the sun, right from behind the bushes… And I had neither a gun nor a knife on me, damn it. I just froze solid.»

The third, a lanky fellow with long, greasy hair, stepped out of the house, not lowering his long-barreled rifle.

«It's a good thing you're with them, mister,» he addressed Grie, «otherwise I wouldn't have waited to see if they started peaceably

chattering or opened fire. I told Scott long ago that I'd never wait to see what the savages would do. As far as I'm concerned, the farther they stay from me, the better I feel. He, Scott that is, just growls at me…»

«And you want me to praise you for your thick-headedness, Charlie?» Randall retorted listlessly. «When meeting Indians, always have patience. It's like encountering a large predator: if you rush, you lose all chance of victory.»

«So, you're a missionary, then? Or did I mishear?» clarified Charlie, stepping up to Grie. «If you know Scott, that means you've been tramping this land for a long time. You must have caught and converted all the redskins by now, father?»

«No need for irony, my friend,» the Jesuit smiled.

«Where are you coming from now?» Randall asked curiously, turning to Charlie: «Why don't you get moving and fetch the coffee pot…»

«I was in the north, with the Hunkpapa,» the Jesuit reported almost indifferently.

«Visiting Sitting Bull? What's he like? I heard he's completely cross-eyed, bow-legged, and generally fearsome as the devil himself.»

«Rumors have a way of distorting reality,» Grie shrugged, «such is their nature. If it weren't for that, rumors would be information.»

«Take a seat,» Randall made an inviting gesture to the Cheyennes, «but first, bring your own cups.» He made a sign corresponding to the word «dishes» in sign language. «We don't have enough mugs or bowls for everyone. Understand?… I've been stuck here for so long, but the savages remain savages. Sometimes it seems to me they simply don't want to change, despite life beating them down year after year. Now there will surely be a flood of prospectors in the Black Hills because of the gold, which means soldiers will march here to protect the prospectors from the Indians, and the Indians from the prospectors. Wooden towns will spring up immediately. And where there's a town, the white man feels firmly like the master; there's no place for the Indian there, nor for the entire old way of life. If the savages remain with their customs, they will be wiped out.»

«You are right,» agreed the missionary, rubbing his tired hands. «These children of nature don't want to know anything beyond what they've long been familiar with. I well remember the times when a steamboat was a marvel to most Indians. Listening to my stories about how a steamboat works, they would shake their heads in disbelief. Steamboats have been

plying the Missouri for many years now, but even today there are many tribes on the plains who have never seen a steamboat or a locomotive. Not long ago, I was telling a chief about a steamboat and how it works. I had to communicate with him through a translator who often meets with white people and has even been to Washington. I can speak the languages of the Absaroke and the Blackfeet easily, but I don't know the Lakota language well enough. „What is he saying?" I ask the translator. „The chief says he doesn't believe it." — „Well, explain to him that you've seen it yourself." — „Alright." — „Now tell him about the locomotive." — „He says he doesn't believe that either." — „So confirm my words. You know I'm not lying. And now tell him about the telegraph." — „What is that?" I explain in detail, saying, with a thin wire you can communicate with anyone, for example, sitting here you can talk to the White Father in Washington. „I won't translate that," my translator answers me. „Why?" And he says: „I don't believe it myself."»

«Funny,» Charlie spat.

«What a people,» the second prospector suddenly giggled, glancing sideways at the Cheyennes. «Sitting there, drinking our coffee. We're here talking our tongues off about their souls, and they're just staring ahead, not a peep. One word for them — dirty barbarians.»

«Funny,» Charlie repeated, and after picking his finger in each nostril, he blew his nose loudly.

«And I look at their squaw and think: wouldn't they let us have a go with her?» the giggling prospector suddenly suggested. «I'd give them an unopened pack of cartridges for it.»

«If you wish to part with your hair, or even your head, right now, then you can propose such a deal to them,» said Randall.

«What's the big deal? I've heard redskins often trade their women.»

«But not the Cheyennes,» said Randall, taking a sip of coffee. «These people are more concerned than others about the virtue of their women. So don't stare too hard at that Indian woman.»

«It reminds me of a story,» the third prospector started on his own topic. «When I was in Dodge, I got together with a widow named Rosie…»

«Since you've brought up women,» Grie raised his eyebrows, drawing some mental pictures, «I'll tell you about a woman I met among the Flatheads.»

«You've been to those devils too?»

«Yes, I've been there. So, about the woman… It was about two years ago, but I remember her face as if it were yesterday, very expressive, green-eyed…»

«Green-eyed?» Randall was surprised. «Are you talking about a white woman?»

«Yes, but she had spent many years among the Flatheads. They captured her when she was traveling to Oregon, where she hoped to make a life for herself. Actually, as I understood from talking to her, before that she sold her body for money… God rest her sinful soul. Her name was Magnolia.»

«Magnolia?» Randall responded, and his forehead wrinkled.

«An uncommon name,» the Jesuit agreed, noticing his interlocutor's reaction.

«I once knew a prostitute by that name,» Randall said thoughtfully. «Red-haired as fire… And as hot as fire…»

«Red-haired?» Grie was surprised in turn. «Yes, Magnolia was very red-haired.»

«Must be a coincidence. You say she lived with the redskins?»

«And was quite content with her situation. She has two sons, lovely children, very lively and spirited. But that's not the point. Magnolia achieved heights unprecedented for a woman among the Flatheads.»

«Meaning?»

«The savages considered her a true embodiment of chastity.»

«Then it's not my Magnolia,» Randall shook his head.

«If yours had red hair, green eyes, and a charming mole above her upper lip, then it is her.»

«Green eyes? A mole? That sweet little devil! Yes, there can't be that many coincidences. Mine was also heading for Oregon… Well, I'll be! And you say she was a respectable wife? And raised good sons?»

«More than that…»

«What could be more, thunder strike me…»

«After the Snakes killed her husband, she took up arms herself. She was eager for revenge, but no one wanted to take her on the warpath. So she went alone. And what do you think? She brought back the head of an enemy. Then she went out several more times, and each expedition ended with a new severed head. She piled them at the foot of the platform where her husband was buried. Soon the savages recognized her as a true warrior

and even asked Magnolia to lead war parties several times, believing that luck would always accompany her. But in the end, she died… I was there in the camp on the day the Flatheads brought her bloodied body back. There are many converts among them, and they agreed to bury her in the Christian way…»

«Damn it!» muttered Randall. «Poor girl! She dreamed of furnishing her house in the style of one of the Louises, and she became a warrior with a face painted in blood… I can't believe it.»

«When I listened to her stories, I didn't believe it either, because her face remained tender, beautiful, fresh. Not one of the killings she committed cast a dark shadow on her features,» said Grie. «And I had the chance to observe this, as I met her three times, each time with a gap of almost a year.»

«Damn it,» Randall said again, «how messy her life turned out.»

«I think you are mistaken, my friend,» the priest shook his head. «She was quite happy. I am sure of it…»

Randall suddenly moved closer to the missionary and took him by the elbow. His eyes gleamed.

«You know, holy father, I am devilishly happy right now, too, because I've seen you again. You didn't meet me by chance; you appeared just at the right time… And not even because… how to put it better… In short, something's gnawing at me. A premonition, or something… It's funny, of course, at my age… I don't know how many sins have stuck to my hide… However many there are, I can't wash them off myself. My life didn't turn out right. Somewhere I took a wrong turn, damn it… Maybe you could absolve them for me, the sins. Or how? You won't refuse me, holy father?» Randall looked intently into the Jesuit's face, then suddenly became embarrassed, his cracked lips trembled. «Then again, don't bother… It's just a moment of weakness… Whatever happens, to hell with it all… Forgive my swearing.»

«You are embarrassed in vain, Scott.» The priest examined Randall's face with an attentive gaze. «You say you have a bad feeling? Something is gnawing at you?»

«To hell with it.»

«Don't say that. I understand you're afraid of seeming weak. But we are talking about death. Here, one must discard all embarrassment. Death demands sincerity and respect. You know the Indians well, haven't you

noticed how thoroughly they approach death? When they go on a war party, they are prepared not only to win but also to die. And the songs they sing when dying? Isn't that true thoroughness? Isn't that attentiveness to the transition to the next world? No, Scott, you are wrong to brush it off. Think carefully…»

«To hell with it,» Randall repeated again and frowned, sinking into his thoughts.

THE CROW CARRIERS

Crazy Bear Mato Witko smiled as he watched Sacred Song, his daughter, breastfeed her newborn son. This was already the second child in her family. Her first daughter had turned two in the spring and was a very clever little girl.

Crazy Bear lit his everyday pipe and blew smoke from his mouth. Holding the pipe with his left hand, he used his right to guide the hazy blue cloud drifting before him to his face and washed himself with it.

«You remind me of Walking Fox when you nurse the baby,» he said. «You look very much like your mother in these moments. It seems all mothers resemble each other. All women are alike. All flowers are alike. All trees…»

«You're singing your song again, as always.»

«Our whole life is a song, my daughter. And this song is pleasing not only to the ear but also to the taste, like the air, like the water.»

«Father, tell me, why did you refuse to lead the Bear Society? People say Black Leg came to you with gifts and asked you to lead it.»

«Wakan Tanka did not give me a son, but he sent me a clever daughter,» Crazy Bear smiled in reply. «I think you will understand me correctly… When the blood of warriors runs hot in men's veins, they do not wish to hear reasonable words. They want to know nothing of holy things. They believe only their strong legs help them stand on the earth. All our youth are like that. Who needs our sacred societies? The warriors want the animals to share their strength with them, but only for war, for killing. They want me to call the Bear People to aid the Lakota, but I will not do it. Today, no one wants to hear the voice of the Great Spirit, yet everyone craves to get his support for their earthly deeds. Why light the path for those who wish to walk with their eyes tightly shut?»

Crazy Bear finished smoking the pipe and shook out the ash.

«You have a good husband, daughter,» he squinted, «but he too believes a warrior's greatness lies in his battle honors. He too takes pride in the wounds he has received. He too strives for glory. He is like the

others… The rocks stand forever and feud with no one; they know how to be an insurmountable barrier. No man, not even the most valiant warrior with all his merits, can match their firmness and reliability. The deeds of men are trivial when men consider them great feats.»

He was silent for a moment, then continued:

«Your husband, together with Moonlight, was recently accepted into the society of the Crow Carriers. They are very brave men. But what is bravery, daughter? No one thinks about that. I have no need for bravery because I know that life does not cease when my body dies from grievous wounds. The Creator placed us on this earth only for a time; then we must pass into another world, and after that into another, and so on without end. I too was young and eager for battle, so that my people would know I did not fear enemy arrows and spears. But in truth, all of us, my friends and I, felt fear because death threatened us. We simply overcame that fear. We were ready to die… But today I know that no one dies, so there is no point in boasting of one's courage. A person is infinite, like the universe itself; Wakan Tanka made him so. He does not die himself, nor can he destroy another. But this is special knowledge. It is the essence of the Great Mystery. Those who are vain and conceited cannot comprehend it. One gains this knowledge by entering into conversation with the invisible world. But the young men do not wish to receive knowledge of that world. They prefer to be called heroes; it flatters their pride. In the days of my childhood, there were many wise and holy men among us. Today I see many healers who can treat wounds with potions, but I scarcely meet any holy people… No one strives to live as the Creator intended. People consider themselves wiser than the Maker. They believe their ways of solving problems are much better. People have forgotten who they are…»

He rose and went out.

The day was overcast. Throughout the village, drums beat loudly. Among the gathered Indians, weeping women were visible. Several old men with rattles and smoking braided stems of sage scurried in a circle, singing a piercing, mournful song. Boys led horses by the bridle.

Sacred Song hung the child's cradleboard on the tent pole and followed her father.

«The people have come out to see off the Crow Carriers,» she said. «I will go get the bag with moccasins and food for Blind Eye.»

Sacred Song's husband had been nicknamed Blind Eye after the last buffalo hunt, when he shot several arrows into a large bull, failing to notice that someone else's arrows were already sticking out of its left flank. Indians always approached buffalo from the right side, as they held their bows in their left hand, but that bull had been wounded by a left-handed hunter who always approached animals from the opposite side.

«Blind eyes you have!» the hunters laughed. «Wasted so many arrows!»

And so the nickname Blind Eye stuck to him.

Today, he was setting out with Moonlight and a dozen other young warriors from the Crow Carrier society on a horse-raiding expedition.

The gathered Lakota parted, allowing the riders with faces painted black to pass. The sleeves of their war shirts billowed freely. They were seamless and were laced up in several places with leather thongs. Only the Crow Carriers possessed such shirts. During battle, the thongs were untied, freeing the arms from the clothing, and the sleeves would stream behind the rider like wings. Tied to their saddles were long leather bags painted with magical symbols, containing crow-feather necklaces.

Moonlight, riding ahead of the others, stopped his horse and shook his head, making the bear claws on his necklace clatter loudly.

«We will return victorious, as always, father!» he exclaimed with a wide smile, his teeth flashing like snow sparks in his black, glossy face.

In ancient times, the Crow Carriers did not go on raids for horses and scalps. They were considered the main defenders of the village and, when going out to meet enemies, were obliged to die rather than retreat a single step. At the entrance to their society's lodge, where the Crow Carriers gathered in the evenings to sing sacred songs, always stood a sheathed sacred spear with numerous amulets tied to it. The Keeper of this spear always took it into battle when the enemy attacked and thrust it into the ground, marking a boundary no enemy could cross.

But that was in the time of the great-grandfathers. Today, the Crow Carriers set out on plundering raids like all other warriors, acquiring war trophies, bringing back horses, and sometimes captive women…

From high beneath the thick gray clouds came the cry of an eagle. The bird soared over the village, now disappearing into the murky air, now emerging from the shaggy clouds.

«A good sign!» shouted Blind Eye. «I had a dream last night where a spotted eagle helped us, showing the way to the enemy camp.»

At that moment, Sacred Song approached him and handed him a bag with jerky. He tied it to his saddle and nodded to his comrades. Without a word, the woman stepped towards Moonlight and handed him a pair of moccasins. Brothers and sisters were not supposed to speak to each other, and this rule was strictly observed by the Lakota at all times. But a man always gave the best of his captured spoils to his sister, and she, in turn, would invariably sew footwear for him and make a cradleboard if he had a child.

The party galloped between the tipis, raising dust and uttering guttural cries. The people watched the riders until they vanished into the haze of the looming mountains. Crazy Bear turned to his daughter. She lowered her eyes and stood in silence.

Meanwhile, the wind grew stronger, and the Crow Carriers, inhaling deeply through their nostrils the streaming dusty air, urged on their short-legged ponies.

«We will fly like true crows through the storm!» laughed Moonlight.

A disheveled wolf jumped out from the bushes and fled. Two grouse rose noisily, flapping their wings.

Large raindrops began to drum on the ground. At first, they fell very sparsely, rolling into little peas in the dust, but within minutes the rain fell in a solid wall, roaring deafeningly and streaming down the steep cliffs in dirty rivulets.

The party halted.

«We bring the storm with us!» exclaimed Elk Tooth, raising his black face to the sky, spreading his arms palms up. «Thunder Beings, do not abandon us! Endow us with your strength!»

Raindrops struck his forehead and scattered into spray; the greasy black paint streamed down his face and quickly spotted his leather shirt. His horse lowered its head dejectedly to the ground.

Moonlight began frantically tearing off his clothes and loosening his hair. The others watched his actions with incomprehension. Blind Eye suddenly slapped his broad forehead with an open palm and started pulling off his shirt. The leather garment, heavy with water, stuck to his body. Moonlight kicked off his moccasins and jumped to the ground.

«Hear me, Father Thunder! Turn your face to me and breathe your strength into me! Endow me with the ability to command the clouds, grant me the power of the wind!» Moonlight sang at the top of his voice,

slapping his bare feet through the bubbling puddles. He kept bending over without stopping his dance, scooping up liquid earth in his hands and smearing it on his face and body. His eyes shone wildly. «Great Thunderer, hear my pleas! Make us like your shadow! We need a agility like no other, we need swiftness and strength. We are the Crow Carriers! We want our arrows to be as fast as these sacred birds, and to fly as far! Help us overthrow our enemies. Turn them to ashes, and we will scatter them with crow's wings!»

The figures of Moonlight and Blind Eye writhed in the thick curtain of rain like crazed ghosts. They thrust their left hands forward and drew their right hands back, as if drawing bows. Invisible arrows flew into the storm. Invisible foes fell defeated. The watching Lakota were silent, their heads drawn into their shoulders. Sometimes they thought someone, through the noise of the rain, echoed Moonlight's words, but they couldn't be sure.

Suddenly, the downpour ceased.

Both dancers froze, their arms hanging limply. Had their words reached the ears of the mighty Thunder Beings? The Indians did not know. They had tried with all their might, and now they felt tired. Moonlight sank to the ground and lay on his back. His naked body trembled slightly, his fists clenching as if gripping axe handles.

«We must put ourselves in order,» said Elk Tooth. «We need to decide what to do next. The sky water has washed off our war paint. This may be a sign that we should not continue the expedition. Or it may mean we need to perform a cleansing ceremony once more. We must smoke the pipe and discuss this… Did the Thunder Beings reveal anything to you or not? Tell us, Moonlight.»

«No,» the young man shook his head discontentedly.

Elk Tooth jumped off his horse. The others followed his example. The sound of water dripping from leaves and gurgling among the stones on the ground could be heard from all sides. The mountains seemed to be singing loudly. Gloomy clouds crawled over the dark cliffs, sometimes swallowing their peaks. A freshness blew over the savages seated in a circle.

«O, Wakan Tanka, we appeal to you through the smoke of our sacred pipe… We are the Crow Carriers. We follow the ways of these birds to always be wise and swift. When the various animals gather for their celebration in the Black Hills, the crow always arrives first. It announces

to us that the animal mystery is beginning, and we do not appear in the Black Hills at that time. None of us has ever seen the animals' festival, but the crow has told us that on the Racecourse, the animals compete in the speed of their feet. Even the turtles take part in the race, but the crow always arrives first. We want to be like it… Today we set out on a raid, but the Thunder Beings have stopped our party. We do not know how to proceed now. Perhaps you mean to say we have broken some law? Then give us another sign… Now we will smoke the pipe, paint ourselves again, and put on our war regalia. We will take our bows from their cases. If you are against this raid, then drench us with water again and soak the strings of our bows…»

As if in answer to these words, a thin sunbeam broke through the clouds and fell on the stone wall behind the Indians. They glanced at each other, and smiles appeared on faces where confusion had just wandered. The savages spread out their things, understanding that the leather clothing would take a long time to dry, and settled on boulders, slowly taking out pouches of black paint powder and boxes of buffalo fat. From long round boxes almost a hand's breadth in diameter, they extracted their crow-feather necklaces, preparing to purify them with smoke from sage and sweetgrass.

They spent the entire evening in ceremonies.

As soon as dawn broke, they mounted their horses, dressed and painted according to all the rules, and rode off along a path barely visible in the grass. To their left, Battle Creek roared, rushing towards the Good River, on whose bank their village remained. Ahead rose the gloomy foothills of the Black Hills.

By noon, the riders saw a scout sent ahead. He appeared from behind the shaggy firs framing the mountain's base and headed towards the party, sometimes reining in his pony and making it circle, signaling the Lakota to hurry to him.

«I saw three Wasichu at the headwaters of Battle Creek. They are doing something incomprehensible in the water,» he reported, «looking for something. They must have lost something.»

«Three men?»

«That's how many I saw. There's a wooden house there where many more could live, but I only saw three. If anyone else lives there, they're gone now, went somewhere…»

«Pale-faces in the Black Hills! The stinking Pale-faces have sneaked onto the sacred land like cowardly coyotes and are now infecting the grass and trees with their diseases! They want to defile our entire land!»

Reaching the indicated place, the Indians hid. Before their eyes stood a lopsided structure sheathed in bark. Wood chips were scattered all over the bank; here and there logs lay among the sawdust. Behind the house, six horses were visible.

A long, straight, well-planed log with a groove hollowed out along its entire length, filled with earth, stretched from the mountainside to the water. A man in dusty clothes stood bent over it, tapping the bottom, shaking the material and poking at it with his fingers. The Pale-face's long gray hair hung down the back of his head onto his shoulders, but the back of his head was bald and shone like a gnawed bone. His face was bearded with gray hair almost up to his eyes.

A second Pale-face was squatting by the creek itself and, as if deep in thought, was shaking a flat pan in his hands, slowly sloshing water out of it. He wore crumpled cloth trousers and a leather jacket with many patches. His head was covered by a hat with sagging brims.

The Indians saw the third white man in the shade of the trees near the log house, before whose door stood a low table. This man was clattering tin dishes and humming something, occasionally coughing. Behind the table, a smoking fire crackled.

Elk Tooth signaled to Moonlight that he would dismount and circle the Pale-faces' dwelling from the other side to capture the horses. Moonlight nodded and signaled the waiting Indians to be patient. After a while, he heard a crow's call repeated three times and squeezed his obedient steed with his knees. The horse carried him out of the thicket.

«Hopo! Forward! Let's go!» Moonlight's voice hoarsely tore the cozy silence.

The Indians noisily burst from the grove, like feathered black demons. The crow wings around their necks shook convulsively. The horses raised a spray of water and in an instant carried the riders to the bank where the crooked hut clung to the cliff. The white men froze. They didn't immediately run for cover but stood for several seconds, turning their heads in confusion.

Blind Eye was the first to swoop down on the man with the flat pan in his hands and shot two arrows into his chest. An Indian riding behind

him with a hawk effigy attached to his head screamed piercingly and whipped the fallen Pale-face with his bow, earning an honorable touch on the enemy.

«I struck him!» he shouted loudly.

A gunshot flashed from the house, and bluish gunpowder smoke spread in the air. Moonlight heard the bullet shatter a branch right above his head. Two Lakota, turning their horses, burst into his field of vision. Another leaned sideways from his horse, hiding from the shot, but lost his balance and tumbled head over heels. He immediately got up and hid behind the thick trunk of a felled tree lying nearby.

The bearded old man with the shining bald spot took a few steps and picked up a rifle from the ground. The leather strap attached to it swung, knocking dust from his shirt sleeves. The man didn't stop and continued running towards the hut. His hands nervously worked the bolt, but something prevented him from firing.

Moonlight approached him, his eyes fixed on the shining crown of his head, around which sparse long hair splashed. The air flowed loudly over Moonlight's face, as if sticking to the greasy paint on his forehead and cheeks. As if overcoming great resistance, the wind slipped through the black crow wings fluttering near the savage's cheeks. The smooth back of the victim's head drew closer, filling all the space. Now the pores in the skin, from which dirty gray hairs stuck out, and the old-age spots, whose appearance disgusted Moonlight, became clearly visible.

Moonlight brought his war club with a stone head down hard on the Pale-face's head. A dull thud was heard. The horse carried the savage on, and the fugitive fell face-first into the sand.

The Lakota circled the house. With a loud thud, arrows stuck into the wooden walls, chipping off small pieces of bark. In the doorway, a figure in a red shirt writhed, trying to pull an arrow from its belly with its hands. Sprawled before the entrance was a man with two tin cups in his absurdly twisted hand.

Through the smoky haze, Moonlight saw that Elk Tooth and Lame Stone Calf had caught the Pale-faces' horses and were driving them across the creek to the opposite bank.

Blind Eye raced before the hut's window, making his horse spin in place or rear up, and loudly shouted insults at the enemy shooting at him. He couldn't see the man hiding in the deep shadow of the interior, but he beat

his chest and shook a spear with a shaggy bundle of hair tied to its shaft above his head. His eyes glowed like coals in his black face. Suddenly, he spurred his horse with his heels and directed it straight at the window from which a rifle barrel protruded.

A shot rang out, then a second. Blind Eye shuddered like a soft tree crown in a sudden gust of wind and fell. The bullet had pierced him through under his left collarbone.

Moonlight, on the gallop, hooked his friend by the long hair, deftly caught him under the arms, and threw him across his saddle, quickly carrying him away from the battlefield.

«This is a bad day to die,» whispered Blind Eye as they laid him in the grass. «Today I will not travel the Ghost Road. I feel fine...»

But Moonlight was already racing back to the house. Madness seized him. He jumped from his horse at full speed and found himself inside, but saw no one. Probably, the last Wasichu had managed to slip away while the Lakota were busy with Blind Eye.

The Indian ran outside with a scream that made his throat swell like a bubble. He furiously tore the crow effige from his shoulders with both hands and, falling to his knees, plunged his long knife into the ground several times. Then he dashed to the nearest corpse, swiftly scalped the dead man, and smashed his skull with his club. And then he saw the bald head — the second corpse had no hair. A crow's caw came from above. Hearing its hoarse voice, the Indian dropped one knee onto the dead man's head and began to cut it off with his knife.

THE CELEBRATION

The village was jubilant. The war expedition of the Crow Carriers could be considered a success, as no one had died. Blind Eye's wound was severe, but he had ordered to be carried on a mat closer to the communal fire to enjoy his tribesmen's joy. From beneath his half-closed eyelids, he watched the celebration.

The fire blazed, musicians pounded the drums, and singers took turns performing their songs. People laughed loudly, watching the dancers and scooping food prepared for the feast from the kettles.

Moonlight sat inside his warrior society's lodge, his head in his hands, thinking painfully…

When he had ridden into camp that morning, waving a bag over his head — a bag he had picked up in the plundered prospectors' cabin and into which he had thrown the severed head of a Pale-face — he had felt happy. His loyal friends galloped behind him. Some clutched the rifles of the Pale-faces, their barrels adorned with the scalps of the defeated enemies. The warriors drove before them six horses laden with bags and bundles.

Sisters and wives rushed to meet the riders, taking the trophies from their hands. Now the women would stretch the scalps on small hoops to dry thoroughly and paint their inner sides a bright red. After the Scalp Dance, the shorn hair of the enemies would either be discarded or used to decorate war shirts.

Moonlight was not married. He had long ago decided to devote himself to the art of war and did not wish to waste time courting girls. He stopped before Blind Eye's tipi and waited for Sacred Song to come out. He was supposed to give his best trophy to his sister. Since he was not allowed to speak to her, Moonlight silently handed her the reins of the captured horse and threw the bag at her feet. A head rolled out, thudding heavily against the tipi pole. Sacred Song grabbed it by its bloody beard and held it aloft, showing the people. Victory shouts merged into a noisy chorus. He shook the bag, emptying it of squirrel skins, tin cups, bundles of glass

beads, crumpled plaid shirts, and other miscellaneous items.

At that moment, a horse appeared, dragging behind it the poles of a travois on which lay the pale-faced Blind Eye. Sacred Song tossed the severed head aside and rushed to her wounded husband.

Crazy Bear pushed his way through the noisy crowd. He glanced indifferently at the heap of goods and suddenly gasped, covering his mouth with his hand.

«What happened, father?» Moonlight was surprised. «What remarkable thing do you see?»

Crazy Bear bent down and picked up a thick stack of papers in a leather cover. He recognized the tattered, falling-apart notebook of Randall Scott.

«Where did this come from?»

«I don't know. Probably it was in the bag when I threw the other things in,» the young man shrugged.

«This thing belongs to Ichi-Mawani, your real father. Did you see him there, where you fought?»

«No,» the young man shook his head decisively and bent down to the head lying at his feet.

Mato Witko fixed his gaze on the swollen, bearded face, past which the fringe on Moonlight's shirt sleeve brushed. Something stirred within him, and he took the bloody trophy from the young Indian's hands. Bringing the head close to his eyes, he studied it silently.

«Does the arrow act rightly when it pierces the man who shot it? He gave it the force of motion. He was its father...» he began, turning to Moonlight. «Does the son act rightly by killing his father, who gave him the force of life?»

Crazy Bear brought the severed head close to Moonlight's face and shook it.

«Look, you have killed your father...»

The young Indian blinked.

«Why father?»

«This is the head of Ichi-Mawani,» said the Bear.

«No! It can't be!» the astonished youth exclaimed. «That's a completely different Wasichu!»

«It is Ichi-Mawani. He has grown gray and old, his face is covered with a beard, and the back of his head has become smooth and hairless, as often happens with white men... You did not recognize him,» the Bear explained

calmly and handed the head to Moonlight. «Go and tell your mother about this. And do not display this head for the dance with the other scalps… Ichi-Mawani is your father by blood…»

Now it was night, and the participants of the expedition were dancing around the large fire to the admiring cries of their tribesmen. The wives and sisters of the victors stood inside the circle, holding aloft sticks with the scalps of the defeated enemies tied to them. Everyone was rejoicing, while Moonlight sat alone, engulfed in sorrowful thoughts. He felt no grief or regret for what he had done, but he understood that he was obliged to go to the prospectors' cabin and arrange for the burial of his father's mutilated body, as the rules of the Lakota demanded. Superstition forbade him from leaving a dead relative on the ground like carrion.

He left the tipi and saw Walking Fox and Magaju, whose face was smeared with ashes. She had not seen her husband for many years, and he had long been dead to her. But today she had received confirmation that he was no longer in this world, and she had blackened her face. She did not weep, as other widows did, yet anxiety festered in her heart like a boil. A son had killed his father…

«Tomorrow I will go to the place where we killed those Wasichu,» Moonlight began, «and bury the remains of Ichi-Mawani…»

Together, they walked towards the brightly lit dance ground, where five men dressed in short skirts made of eagle and crow feathers were dancing. Two of them had bird effigies tied to their buttocks, their tails sweeping the ground. Loudly clattering rattles against their spears, the dancers bounded up to the spectators and spun before them, bending low to the ground and stretching out their necks pleadingly. A long feather stood vertically on the head of one of the dancers, quivering plaintively with every step.

These were the Beggars — the most outstanding young men of the village, who transformed into paupers for the duration of the dance. They contorted their faces, trying to make them impossibly pathetic, and sang a mournful song in high-pitched tones, begging for gifts. People jumped back from them but did not run away. Anyone touched by the dancers' spears or hands laughed loudly and hurried to bring something to the fire, displaying their generosity. Soon, a noticeable pile of various treats and household items grew on the ground.

As soon as the Beggars felt satisfied, they skillfully piled the collected goods onto a stretched deerskin and ran through the village, distributing

the gifts to the poorest tribesmen.

Approaching the lit area, Moonlight saw a man kneeling before the fire, bare from the waist up, gathering smoldering coals with his hands. His long hair was unusually tied into a tight braid on the crown of his head, sticking up like a tree branch. His hands and face shone with freshly applied white clay. Long lightning bolts were painted on his legs. Grabbing the coals in his palms, the Indian vigorously ground them into powder and brought them to his mouth, pretending to be tormented by a terrible thirst and quenching it with hot fire.

«Heyoka! Heyoka!» the children squealed delightedly, pointing their fingers at the strange man.

Then the Indian straightened to his full height. A round leather shield and a quiver with a bow and arrows hung on his chest. Warriors always carried these things on their backs, but this was no ordinary man; he was a heyoka, who was obliged to do everything backwards. He abruptly bent over, thrusting his head between his knees, and his face appeared from under his loincloth, clutching an eagle-bone whistle in his teeth. The people gathered around laughed loudly. After whistling a couple of times, the Indian called a bright sorrel pony with white circles painted on its rump — the circles usually drawn around the eyes of war horses to enhance their sight. As soon as the horse ran into the noisy circle, the heyoka jumped towards it, grabbed its long, fluffy tail with both hands, and began fitting it with a bridle made of thin rope, as if it were the animal's muzzle and not its tail. Having clumsily adjusted the rope, the Indian let out a victory cry and leaped onto his horse, seating himself backwards on its back. The spectators cheered noisily, and the rider urged the sorrel into a gallop. Leaning towards his steed's tail, he shouted into it in a piercing voice:

«Carry me, my brother! Carry me far from my cruel enemies, and for this I will tie a piece of beautiful red cloth to your neck! Help me, and I will give you an eagle feather for each ear!»

The spectators waved their arms and whooped, portraying the evil enemies reaching for the rider. The rider made faces, twisted, and writhed, as if dodging blows raining down on him. Sometimes he unexpectedly pulled a bow from its case and hit one of the nearby spectators with it, growling like a bear all the while.

This was the heyoka's improvised participation in the celebration, and

the people were happy to have this sudden opportunity not just to dance on the occasion of a successful war expedition, but also to laugh.

Usually, the heyokas' performance was a whole ceremony, prepared for long in advance. A dog was specially slaughtered for their ritual, as an offering to the six powers and the four directions of the world. No one killed dogs quite like the heyokas did: they strangled it with a loop through some elusive movement, and death came instantly, as if from a lightning strike.

Heyokas were those who possessed sacred power and had received instructions from the Thunder Beings in their visions. They knew how to summon rains and ward off hurricanes. The mysterious power began to descend upon them from the Heavens when their behavior resembled that of fools. At times they did everything backwards, and people laughed looking at them. The heyokas amused their tribesmen so that human hearts would open up and easily admit the truth, which hides behind too many different faces and always comes to people unrecognized, making it hard to accept. The heyokas knew how to distract and brought the truth as if in jest…

Suddenly, the rider stopped the sorrel horse before Moonlight and jumped to the ground, performing a daring flip in the air. Stepping towards the silent youth, the heyoka comically squatted and spread his arms, showing the greatest surprise and incomprehension.

«A sorrowful expression is fitting for people who lack life force, my son!» he exclaimed, moving closer to Moonlight. «Rejoice and sing songs with everyone, giving thanks to the Winged Spirit for every moment of life granted to you!»

Walking Fox and Magaju clasped their hands, recognizing beneath the thick, already cracked layer of white clay the features of Crazy Bear.

«My heart is immersed in sorrow, father,» Moonlight replied.

«What good are tears, young man? Do they help us correct our mistakes?» exclaimed the Bear. «Sorrow is not the warrior's path. Lift your head and perform the deed befitting a man! You have contributed to the coming of bad times. You are one of those who fan the terrible wind. Now a hurricane will come. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps later. It is unavoidable. But the world renews itself even after the most terrible storm, my son. Even on the prairie, charred after a fire, green grass grows. The Great Spirit sends us heavy trials. We may all perish. But we will return to this life, because

each must walk their Path to the end, even if they have to start their journey anew hundreds of times…»

AKICITA NAZHIN

His Story as translated by Winthrop Haley

Few of us ever learned that Dick Moonlight had killed his own father. But I heard Crazy Bear talking to him after he returned from that expedition. I did not reveal this to anyone, because every man has his own life, into which outsiders should not pry.

Yes, it is a very bad thing — to kill one's own ancestor. But who could have known? We all went to war, ready to shed blood, our own and that of others. And none of us knows what trials the Great Spirit has prepared for us.

I remember how the young man left the village the next day, and no one guessed where he was going. Crazy Bear went with him.

Later I learned from them that they built a small platform in a tree and placed upon it all they could find. The wolves had already gnawed badly on the corpses of those Wasichu. Crazy Bear said he saw many tracks there. He insisted that Moonlight perform the Purification Ceremony near the battle site. I think he was worried that the spirit of Ichi-Mawani would seek revenge on our tribe. But I cannot say for sure.

Crazy Bear was a shaman who could easily communicate with shadows from the ghost world. None of our healers or medicine men were as skilled and experienced in this matter as he. Therefore, I cannot speak for him. Before, he was often silent, because one should not speak of mysteries. But now we are all old, and very few of us remain who remember the distant times, so we tell all we know and remember.

Crazy Bear said that the Great Mystery punishes those who stray from the line marking the correct path for each of us. He warned that Moonlight was deeply guilty before all of us, for he had not wished to devote himself to the strict life of a holy man. The young man had acted against the will of the Great Spirit, and the price for this choice would be paid not only with his own life, but with the lives of others. So spoke Crazy Bear. I remember tears welling in his eyes when he said this. He felt great pain for the

suffering of others, but could do nothing.

The first tangible blow for this brave Moonlight was the killing of Ichi-Mawani, because the burden of killing a kinsman cannot be atoned for by anything. Moonlight knew this. He understood that other terrible events would follow, for which he would endlessly blame himself.

At the end of the Moon of Falling Leaves, we took down our tipis and set out for the wintering place at Yellow Medicine Root Creek. But our scouts reported seeing a party of Long Knives there. We did not know which soldiers these were, but decided not to meet them, because no one was sure they hadn't learned about the killing of those Wasichu in the Black Hills. We felt no guilt, because the Pale-faces had sneaked onto land we considered sacred. They had to pay with their lives. But the Long Knives sought to punish us for every white man killed. So we moved further along the Smoky Earth River and reached the place where Black Pipe Creek flows into it. There we hoped to join the camp of Big Lance.

But on the way to Black Pipe Creek, disaster struck.

We were traveling in a long line. Some had rushed far ahead, some had fallen behind, as often happens. Among the last was Sacred Song with her child. One of the poles of her travois got stuck between rocks and broke. Two women went towards a grove to cut down a suitable sapling, while Sacred Song's husband stayed with her, scanning the surroundings. At that time, they called him Blind Eye because of that funny incident on the buffalo hunt, but I always preferred his old name — Many-Tracks-on-the-Trail. Everyone acknowledged him as the best tracker and hunter in our band.

I remember a wagon with Pale-faces rolling out of a ravine. All our people nearby grew alarmed and started calling the women back, but the white men did nothing. We thought they were afraid of us. However, we were mistaken. I heard shots and saw puffs of smoke appear near the wagon. The air was frosty and clear, and the shots sounded like loud handclaps.

Then our people became seriously worried. We didn't know how many men were hiding in the wagon and decided to move away. But the two women who had gone to the grove had not returned in time; we needed to pick them up. And we would have had to abandon Sacred Song's belongings because the travois was no longer usable. While we were busy with the horses, one of the women stumbled. A moment later, I heard

Sacred Song cry out and clutch her chest. Seeing that she had been hit by a bullet, Blind Eye turned towards the wagon and charged the white men. He rode very close to them and fell to the ground. Several figures jumped out of the wagon and knelt down, shooting at us.

Then ten of our warriors galloped up, and I joined them. We killed everyone who was in and around the wagon. One white man pretended to be dead, trying to deceive us, but we struck all the bodies with our axes, and this one screamed loudly when I hit him on the shoulder to chop off his arm and hang it over the entrance to my tipi.

Blind Eye lay breathless when we approached him. A bullet had gone clean through his throat, and two others had hit his chest. Two more of our men were wounded, but not seriously. Sacred Song died on the way. We brought her to the camp already stiff. Her baby had fallen into the creek when her hands weakened and had frozen severely in the icy water while we fought. We could not save the child.

This was a great sorrow for Crazy Bear and Walking Fox. All winter they went to their daughter's grave and sat for a long time under the burial scaffold, talking with her spirit. They took the granddaughter (Sacred Song's eldest daughter) into their lodge. The girl was five winters old that year; her name was Wachanga Win, meaning Sweet Grass.

Moonlight could find no peace. He cut his arms and chest with a knife and cut off his braids. For a man, this was very unusual, because among us it is customary only for women to mutil themselves in sign of grief. Warriors usually cover their faces with ashes and sink into deep silence. Moonlight gave away all his property, keeping only his weapons, two war horses, and a buffalo robe to cover his body. Many in the camp heard his voice when he mounted his horse, rode out into the mountains, and howled like a wolf there.

In the spring, he led parties several times and went for the scalps of white people. He seemed to me as fierce as Crazy Bear in his youth. He was courageous, and people respected him.

Thus began our incessant clashes with the Wasichu.

Two winters later, we saw many soldiers. We had never before thought that so many soldiers could appear in our country at once. They came from three directions in large columns. With them rode the Wolves. This did not surprise us, because we always knew the Wolves would do anything to harm us. By that time, they were no longer capable of fighting us on

their own, so they joined the Long Knives and served them like dogs. They even wore the blue clothing of the soldiers.

The Lakota long avoided the soldiers, not engaging in battle. But fight we eventually had to, and the battles were fierce. From that time on, war did not leave our land until the last of our war chiefs laid down his arms. After that, we lost everything we had.

MATO WITKO

His Own Words

In those years, an extraordinary man named Tashunke Witko (*Tȟašúŋke Witkó*), which means Crazy Horse, began to rise among our young leaders. During that war, I had the chance to meet him only once, as the war parties were constantly away from the camps, and the warriors had no time for conversation. But after the soldiers left our lands, I became closely acquainted with him.

Tashunke Witko was not merely a leader of those who thirsted for military victories. He was a true Wichasha Wakan, one initiated into the mysteries of the universe, possessing the gift of foresight. I was as glad for him as for no one else, because I immediately recognized in him a man of great power.

He was not tall, which distinguished him from most of our people, for the Lakota are almost all very tall. And he also stood out strongly from others by the color of his hair. It was not black with a blue sheen, like everyone else's, but almost brown. This seemed strange because he was a full-blooded Indian. His father belonged to the Oglalas, and his mother was from the Sicangus. He confessed to me that as a child, when his community's tents were pitched not far from Horse Creek, the Wasichu passing by in wagons often called him to come with them, thinking he was a white boy captured by the Lakota.

All the ancestors on his father's side were healers and shamans, but none possessed such abilities as he. None of them, as he told it, had ever become a war leader. He was the first in his lineage to become a Shirt Wearer and to raise parties for war expeditions. As for the White Faces, he thought we should not fight them. But since the Lakota desired it, he felt obliged to help them and for this, he sought counsel in the spirit world. He did not believe we would prevail, but he did not give up or lay down his arms.

Two years after the great expedition of the Long Knives into our country, Red Cloud won a decisive victory near the mountain called Lodge

Trail, in a battle we called the Hundred Slain. Tashunke Witko was one of those who lured the soldiers into the trap. I knew that such victories would be few for the Lakota, but I was still proud of my people. Among us were brave and strong warriors, and I was sorry that I myself did not take part in that battle. I watched with some envy the young men whose eyes burned with excitement, and I remembered how I myself used to return from the warpath. I saw how happily Moonlight returned, pointedly not bandaging his shot-through arms and legs, and he looked at me defiantly.

«Haven't we beaten the Wasichu? Haven't we defeated them? Where is their famed strength, father?»

«That is a victory over a detachment, my son, not over a nation,» I tried to explain, but Moonlight refused to think rationally. He was like most of our youths, who were satisfied with a one-time success, not caring about the consequences and not perceiving the world as a vast whole where everything is tightly interconnected.

Tashunke Witko — Crazy Horse — returned without a single scratch. I do not recall him ever being hit by an arrow, bullet, or knife when he went to war. At least, that's what his friends said. In that battle, he lured the soldiers into the trap, constantly dismounting to serve as an attractive target for the soldiers' rifles. They shot at him incessantly, but the bullets did not touch the young leader. Several times, shells fired from a cannon on the fort wall exploded near him, and yet he remained unharmed.

«I was never afraid of their fire,» he told me once. «I always did what I had to do. Wakan Tanka protects me as long as I do not transgress the permitted. I try to be careful.»

He never sought to elevate himself among his tribesmen, never put himself forward. He did not participate in the victory dances upon returning from war expeditions and did not bring back enemy scalps. I did not see war trophies in front of the entrance to his lodge. He never acted for himself. He didn't even steal horses from the Psaloks (Crow) because he had no need for wealth. He never forgot that the Sacred Power was present in every action he took; therefore, it was not he who did everything, but the Great Spirit. Tashunke was sure he would be punished the moment he reached out to take something for himself personally.

And so it happened one day.

From a young age, he loved a girl whom her father gave to another. And so one day, Tashunke Witko decided to take her away. He did the same

as I had with Walking Fox in my youth. Young Wolf had galloped to take Walking Fox back, but I killed him. With Tashunke Witko, it happened differently. The offended husband entered his tipi and shot him with a revolver. The bullet hit Tashunke in the head and shattered his cheekbone. No one else would have survived that, but helpers from the invisible world helped him get up and recover very quickly. A large scar remained on his face. This incident finally confirmed Crazy Horse in the thought that he was not allowed what others were. He was an instrument in the hands of the Great Spirit. He carried out only the will of the Heavenly Father, having no right to personal desires.

Shamans constantly remind people that they occupy a place no more important than the smallest ant. But few know how to retain this understanding. When I was expelled from the Fox Society, I felt mortally offended. I did not understand that I, accustomed to hearing praise and receiving all kinds of attention, had placed myself too high in my own eyes. I had to go through humiliation to remember my true place in life and to temper my spirit.

Crazy Horse was stripped of his honorable title of Shirt Wearer for taking another man's wife. This denied him the right to lead war parties. The offense was not so great, and another man would not have been reproached, since the woman had decided to leave her husband. But Crazy Horse was not among ordinary people. Having once become a Shirt Wearer, he obligated himself to be an example in everything. And he was not supposed to forget that.

He turned to the Spirits. He prayed alone, going for many days into the Black Hills. And the young warriors gathered around him again, despite the elders' displeasure. Crazy Horse went north, where he joined the tribe of Sitting Bull, and for several years tried to keep away from the white people.

But soon the Blue Coats flooded the Black Hills, and a new war broke out. Many Lakota left the reservations and came to Tashunke Witko's camp to clash with the Long Knives. That is when the battle occurred that our people call the greatest victory over the White Faces.

In the valley of a river called the Greasy Grass, thousands of Lakota gathered. The horse herds were so huge that they had to be pastured a great distance from the enormous camp, so that the people would not suffocate from the dust raised by the horses. When the soldiers appeared,

our people were not ready for battle, as we did not believe the Long Knives would dare attack such a gathering of Indians. But the soldiers acted recklessly. They hoped for an easy victory. They were led by a man we called Long Yellow Hair.

In that fierce battle, Dick Moonlight was killed. A bullet struck him right in the heart. His friends left his body lying in one of the burial lodges. Someone gave him an embroidered shirt as a farewell gift. He had no clothes of his own since the death of Sacred Song and her husband. He went into battle completely naked, even without a breechcloth, his body fully covered in paint. The rest of the time, he wrapped himself in his only buffalo robe. He was left lying handsome, in a richly embroidered shirt of soft deer hide, but a few days later new soldiers arrived, and with them galloped the Psaloks, who looted the burials and mutilated the dead.

I wanted to perform the soul-keeping ceremony to purify his spirit. Moonlight had greatly wronged our people, as he stubbornly refused the path destined for him from above. He killed those he considered his enemies and led others. Many died because of this blind passion for war. He had harmed not only himself, so his soul was destined to wander between Heaven and Earth. The Lakota have a ceremony through which shamans help a lost soul purify itself so well that it becomes one with the Great Spirit and does not have to wander for many years in torment. But for such a ritual, I needed Moonlight's body to cut at least a lock of his hair. I could not get anything, however, because the Psaloks and the Wolves (Pawnees?) looted the Lakota graves at the Greasy Grass and chopped up the bodies of the dead. They cut off Moonlight's head and took it away. I could only pray to the Creator to have mercy on my son and prepare him for a new life. I know that Moonlight will return one day to lead the tribes along the sacred path. In the invisible world, the truth will be revealed to him, and he will perceive the Light not with his eyes but with his heart. This is inevitable. However, now he will have to undergo much more serious trials and temptations. Such is the desire of He-Who-Grants-Life.

After the battle at the Greasy Grass, the Lakota lost their peace for good. They suffered defeat after defeat. Our villages were choked with blood. Death arrived, the death I had foreseen long ago. It no longer crept up quietly but raced like the Thunder Bird. All who crossed its path were left lying in charred tipis. Not long before, the white people had mercilessly shot the buffalo and killed almost all of them; now the Indians took the

place of the buffalo. There is no point in telling you again, my friend, what others have recalled so many times. It is impossible to list the names of all the dead relatives, there is no strength to return in thought to that trail bitter with tears.

Crazy Horse also laid down his arms. He was in the reservation for a whole summer. He was overcome by heavy thoughts, and he could not master them. He had lived a little more than thirty winters, and he listened attentively to my story of how I had abandoned the warpath at his age and had not strayed from the chosen path since, because such was the will of Wakan Tanka.

«I could not do as you did,» he told me. «The Heavenly Father endowed me with the strength to protect the people, and I carried out His will.»

But times had changed, and the life of our people had entered a course completely unlike the former life. Crazy Horse understood this. He told me that when he immersed himself in the world of spirits, where the voices of all living beings and even inanimate objects — which are also truly alive — can be heard, he was filled with peace. He felt how the whole world became kin. The four-legged and the two-legged, the birds and the fish, people of different skin colors whom no Lakota had ever met — all merged into one. But Crazy Horse would return here and see no harmony. He could live here as long as he was needed by his people. The people wanted to fight and asked him to lead them. He fulfilled their request. When they decided to fight no more, he led them to the reservation. After that, his time was up. This great man had become unnecessary.

Many leaders, who had long since laid down their arms and lived in the reservation, envied Crazy Horse's popularity even after he had left the warpath. They were jealous of his past and his future. They feared that his fame would overshadow their high positions. And they began to slander him. These were empty words, unsupported by anything, but the ears of bad people are made in such a way that evil speeches simply stick to them. Perhaps the white bosses did not believe the slander against Crazy Horse, but they also feared him and pretended to believe in the danger emanating from the young leader. In the end, Lieutenant Clark, whom we called White Hat, gave the order to arrest or kill Crazy Horse. As soon as he made this decision, the news spread throughout the reservation. The Lakota absorb news as quickly as parched earth absorbs long-awaited raindrops.

That day, a messenger galloped to White Hat and shouted:

«Crazy Horse is saddling his horse! He will either start a war or escape!»

Then White Hat gathered the Indian police and hurried to Crazy Horse's camp on the bank of White Clay Creek. Very soon they met Turning Bear (Kicking Bear?), a warrior from Crazy Horse's group. He had a rifle and a pistol. On his head was a warbonnet of eagle feathers. Turning Bear was ready to fight.

«You are Lakota too!» he addressed the policemen. «Why have you taken the side of the White Faces? Why do you want to kill Crazy Horse?»

«I allow no one to question me!» shouted the scout Buffalo Dance in reply and immediately shot the horse of Turning Bear, killing the steed instantly.

Then another policeman rode up to Turning Bear and, before he could recover, began to beat him on the head with a revolver. Among the policemen was Kill the White Cow, Turning Bear's brother. He dismounted to his bloodied brother and said:

«This is what happened to you. Why did you take up arms again?»

«You came with the police to kill my leader. You came as an enemy.»

«I am not an enemy, my brother. Come to your senses, you will change nothing, Turning Bear. Nothing can be changed now. Life has become different.»

A little later, ten Lakota in magnificent warbonnets appeared before the police. They were ready to give battle. At the front rode a sixteen-year-old boy named Black Fox. At fifteen, he had taken part in war for the first time, fighting against the soldiers in the Greasy Grass valley. Now he was ready to fight again for his beloved leader. In one hand he held a revolver, in the other a carbine; eagle feathers swayed on his head.

«Men!» exclaimed Black Fox. «Since I became fit for war, I have sought opportunities to prove myself in battle! I am ready to die if you, Lakota in blue coats, decide to kill me!»

He snatched a knife from his belt, clenched it in his teeth, and stretched out his rifle and revolver before him. As soon as he spurred his horse, setting it into a gallop, a warrior from the police named White Man's Horse rode out to meet him, holding a pipe in his hand.

«Listen, youth! You are my nephew, but I am ready to kill you if you refuse to accept the pipe!» The policeman looked back at his companions.

«Don’t shoot, but be ready. If Black Fox takes the pipe, then everything will be settled.»

The boy stopped his horse. He could not refuse a man who was extending a pipe toward him. The pipe is sacred to the Lakota. I have said this many times. He who refuses the pipe violates the foremost commandment of his people.

They smoked, and the fight did not happen. But the boy still performed a feat. He rode out to meet a strong enemy, ready to die. No less than twenty guns were aimed at him. He was brave, even too brave for his age.

«Crazy Horse has left the reservation,» Black Fox informed them. «He took his sick wife with him. I don’t think he wants to fight. I am the main one in this camp now, so I decided to protect the women and children if you tried to shoot at our tents.»

Crazy Horse had left the reservation without informing the white commander. This caused a storm of anger from Lieutenant Clark. A pursuit was immediately sent after the leader to bring him back.

That night, I saw thick black shadows in the sky around the moon, performing a dance similar to the Scalp Dance. They foretold death. And Crazy Horse was killed.

I tell you this so briefly, as if it all happened in one day. But for me, it was one day. One long, bad day.

BEAR BULL

Crouching low over the smoldering embers, Crazy Bear watched the uneven air move across their surface, changing its color. A faded blanket, heavily frayed at the edges, lay across the Indian's shoulders. His dry, wrinkled hands carefully held plain, hard leather scabbards from which protruded a mighty handle made from a bear's jaw. To the old man's left rested an embroidered leather bag containing a pipe and a bundle of tobacco leaves.

Slowly turning his head and squinting slightly so that his loose gray hair wouldn't get in his eyes, Crazy Bear looked towards the edge where the moss-covered rock he sat on dropped off, revealing a blue abyss. Low, thick white clouds lazily sent shapeless tendrils into the chasm. At times, sounds resembling someone's indistinct whisper carried from the hazy space, and Crazy Bear would nod almost imperceptibly, as if agreeing with an invisible interlocutor. Occasionally, an eagle would cry piercingly.

«We haven't met for a long time, my brother!» a loud voice rang out.

The Indian looked calmly ahead and saw a tall black figure stepping towards him, wearing a mighty, horned bison scalp atop its head. The newcomer sat down on the ground and crossed his legs, his dark moccasin scraping against the small stones.

«I am glad to greet you,» the Indian smiled at Bear Bull.

«You wanted to see me?»

«Yes. I wanted to return your knife to you, because I feel my years are numbered. No person has ever touched this weapon, just as you once commanded. Now I must give the knife back to you, so that after my death it does not fall into the hands of people and be used for an unrighteous cause.»

«Are you tired?» asked Bear Bull, shaking his head, his eyes opening wide, becoming bright white spots on his black face. «Do you wish to leave?»

«No, I am not tired, my brother. It's just that I feel I have told the people all that I could. I tried to make them hear the voice of the Great

Spirit and understand His will. I am not capable of anything more. It seems you chose the wrong man. I have achieved nothing. I failed to guide even those closest to me on the right path.» A bitter expression appeared on the Indian's face.

«The path you have set foot on is still very long. The further you travel it, the more difficulties you will meet on the way. I remember how hard it was for you at the beginning of the path. But you never stopped to think that you are not alone. You have spoken with many holy men, but you never even imagined how difficult it was for them in their time. They seemed strong and wise to you from their birth. Is it not so?»

«You are right,» Crazy Bear nodded. «I saw in them unshakable confidence and firmness. I, however, was always beset by doubts.»

«They looked at you in exactly the same way, my brother. They did not call you a madman without reason. People listened to you and did not understand. They will not understand for a long time yet. But you, too, once thought differently. Your Path was intended more for you than for anyone else. Your words were directed at those like you, like you were before. The voices from the invisible world are not heard by those who have seen completely — such people have nothing to hear, for they discovered everything for themselves long ago.» The black figure of Bear Bull reached forward a hand and scooped up some embers. «Do I have to explain to you that this is hot? You yourself know that fire burns. I appeared before you to tell you what you had not thought of before. In the same way, you converse with others. The Great Spirit sends his messengers only to those who are lost. This is known to you. Why then are you sad?»

«Because I love my people. It pains me to see how the Lakota blindly beat their heads against a rock, striving to pass exactly where it is impossible!» The Indian rose agitatedly, and the blanket slid off him. He straightened up and lifted his head. For a moment, he resembled a young man, straining all his strength to deliver a crushing blow. «Why couldn't I help the people?»

«Reason is speaking through you now,» Bear Bull replied calmly and suddenly became almost transparent, «and you forget that all people are children. They require long and patient work. Did I promise you that you would change the fate of the Lakota? Perhaps someone else told you this?»

«No.»

High in the sky, a blinding zigzag of lightning ran, spread out like

a silver web, and faded. The sky filled with lead and drew closer to the earth. On the blurred horizon appeared multicolored riders leaping over mountain peaks. Curved blades of lightning flashed in their hands. The riders slowly floated over Crazy Bear's head, washing him with a wave of rainy air, and disappeared into the clouds.

«You were given the opportunity to tell the people what would happen if they did not change their way of life. You did that. What happens next is up to the people,» said the black figure of the Spirit. «They have a long road ahead, and you yourself will return to earth more than once to help people, because you have decided so.»

«But it hurts me to see the tears flowing around me. The men are broken and cannot pull themselves together. The children are swollen from hunger. The women lie motionless, awaiting death. I have never seen my tribe in such a state. I want to help, but I don't know how...»

«You are not meant to change the fate of this country. The people will have to suffer because for too long they resisted the will of the Great Spirit, and now they need to go through humiliation to be cleansed. The Inipi ceremony will not help the Indians today, no matter how much they sweat in the purification lodge, no matter how much they expel the filth from themselves. If they understand nothing now, they will have to receive more than one lesson... For many years you carried the words of He-Who-Grants-Life to them, but the men brushed you aside. There were others, too, who came to Earth with the same mission. What can be done? Not everyone understands that walking the sacred path requires great patience and courage.»

«I feel the troubles are not over yet,» Crazy Bear sank to the ground, and his face immediately aged greatly. «There will be new blood...»

«Blood is never new,» the ghost-man shook his bison head negatively, «all blood that is spilled merely continues the turbulent streams of ancient bloodshed. The same thing repeats from age to age. You are good at seeing the future. Did you see the blue uniforms of soldiers shooting your tribesmen there?»

«Yes.»

«And this worries you? But did you not warn them? Do you think the soldiers can harm anyone if the Great Spirit does not wish it? Wakan Tanka breathes upon us with the force that grants life. We are all His children. We are no more important in His eyes than a stone in a mountain stream or an

anthill in the middle of a dense forest. Yet people value themselves very highly and believe they can manage life themselves. They decided their rifles are more powerful than the will of the Great Spirit. They are blind, and you live among them to help them open their eyes… I do not understand why you wanted to talk to me, for I know nothing else that is not already known to you.»

«I only wanted to return your knife to you.» Crazy Bear drew the wide blade from its leather sheath, and the steel sang ringingly as its sharp tip struck a small stone.

«I will take this weapon with me. But do not think your path ends here, my brother,» Bear Bull said firmly and smiled widely. The features of his black face condensed again as he reached for the knife, and Crazy Bear saw before him his own self, as if emerging from a distant past. «You have a long road ahead of you…»

THE ADOPTED SON

The reservation sprawled under the scorching sun like a vast, littered stain. Here and there lay wheels that had fallen off wagons, boards intended for building houses were visible, scraps of discarded, faded cloth whitened the ground, thin dogs with matted fur roamed, and dejected little horses nibbled on yellow grass. Here and there, near the cones of Indian tipis with walls worn through in many places, stood dirty wooden barracks.

Crazy Bear walked along the edge of the dusty road that cut across the reservation in a straight line, stopping now and then to adjust the wide-brimmed hat he had bought at the trading post. An old blue blanket was wrapped around his hips, his torso remained bare, and the brown, wrinkled skin on his shoulders shone under the dazzling yellow light. His long hair swayed in thick, gray streams with every step.

Passing the white Episcopal church, Crazy Bear stopped before some boys playing in the dust. The kids were fussing and laughing exactly as it had happened in Bear's own distant childhood. They were not troubled by the absence of large horse herds or the abundance of wooden sheds standing everywhere. They knew of the past life only by hearsay and accepted the present as a given. They were carefree. A pair of light bows with arrows lacking tips and a couple of light clubs decorated with crow feathers lay in the grass. Most of the boys were dressed in dirty cloth trousers and shirts, but a few wore only breechcloths, though made of fabric, not leather.

«Children,» Crazy Bear began, looking over the children's heads somewhere into the distance. The play stopped. The boys crowded in front of the old man, squinting in the sun. «Is any one of you going to go to the white man's school?»

«Our parents don't want that!» almost all of them shouted at once. «But the white bosses force us to go there, sometimes they take us by force. Why do we need it? We don't want their life! We want to live as our ancestors did!»

«And do you know how to live the old way?»

«Of course! We shoot bows well!»

«Bows?» Bear smiled. «And what do you shoot at?»

«We set up a target.»

«And what does that give you? Can a target pierced by an arrow serve as food?»

«But we are not allowed to hunt. Grandfather, you know yourself that the White Faces don't allow anyone to go hunting. And there are no bison left around.»

«I know,» Bear nodded. «There are no bison left. That means you cannot live as I and my ancestors lived. Therefore, you should not refuse the White Faces' school. That you know how to use arrows is good. Keep that skill, a bow may come in handy. But the bow will not be your primary helper. We live on a limited piece of land. Look around, look carefully. A completely different life is boiling around us, not the one that existed before you were born. For some time, we can live separately from the white world, but the day will come when we will have to merge with their world.»

«Why?»

«To not perish. Otherwise, their world will simply crush us. Before, endless plains lay behind our backs. Before, we could retreat. Today, there is nowhere to retreat to.»

«But if we merge with the White Faces, we will cease to be ourselves,» a boy in a breechcloth stepped forward, «we will lose our face.»

«You think so?» Crazy Bear smiled again and shook his head. «And whose face do you have now?»

«I have the face of a Lakota!» the teenager exclaimed proudly and tossed his long hair.

«But the cloth on your hips is made from the white man's fabric,» the old man objected.

«I have nowhere to get leather. Neither I nor my parents can get a deer,» the boy explained sadly.

«So, you don't quite have the same face I had at your age. You have to put up with many facts. So be courageous and honest to the end. There was a time when the Lakota first encountered the white man's rifles. Very quickly our people realized the advantages of this weapon, and no one was stubborn, no one claimed that the bow and stone axe were better because they were made by Lakota hands. No! We began to take from the white people what we needed. And yet, we did not endure. It is not shameful

to admit this, because there turned out to be far more Wasichu than all our tribes in the prairies and forests. We fought honestly. You children have heard this many times from your fathers and grandfathers. But back then, we had the opportunity to live on vast expanses of the steppe. Today, that opportunity is gone. To gain the right to move freely through the country, we must become part of the White Faces' world, not huddle on this limited piece of land.»

«If we become part of the white man's world, we will lose our face!» repeated the teenager standing closest to the old man.

«If you remain naked, with long braids, a feather in your hair, but forget your native language, you will not be an Indian. You will not be an Indian either if you turn into a beggar with a magnificent eagle headdress. Feathers, braids, and bright paint do not make a man a warrior; that is not enough. But when you know the ancient rituals and your native speech, and at the same time wear the clothes of the White Faces, you can boldly say that you have preserved the face of your tribe. Even if your hair is cut short.»

At the last words, the boys recoiled in horror. The Lakota could not lose their hair — the pride of every warrior.

«Yes, yes,» Crazy Bear nodded. «A person's true face does not depend on their hairstyle or the feathers on their head, although sometimes it doesn't hurt to adopt the appearance corresponding to antiquity… Don't be stubborn, children, go study at the school if they call you. I know well what I am talking about now… But do not forget, while far from home, who you are, which clan and tribe you belong to… My son did not want to learn the way of the white people. He chose the traditional path of a warrior and died at the Greasy Grass. Now he is gone, and yet he could have been useful to his people. Moonlight perished. His death did not benefit the Lakota, did not ease our lot. I am sorry that Moonlight could not look into the future…»

Crazy Bear fell silent. The children stood before the old man for a while and then slowly retreated to their play area. Laughter and cheerful shouts sounded again.

The Indian adjusted his hat and slowly wandered on.

«Grandfather!» came a voice from behind him.

He turned and saw the boy in the breechcloth running towards him.

«Grandfather!»

«Do you want to ask something?»

«Yes. I have heard much about your son, but I have never seen you visit his grave.»

«Moonlight has no grave; I do not have his bones. Our enemies looted his burial, chopped up his body. Where can I get his bones?» Crazy Bear shrugged. There was neither sadness nor regret in his eyes. «My son was a brave warrior, valiant, agile. He died defending the way of life he loved, the freedom, the expanse…» Crazy Bear made a wide gesture with his brown hand. «But you, today's children, do not know that life. You are only familiar with stories, and that is not the same thing.»

«What should we do, Grandfather? Should we renounce the memory?»

«I did not say that. But the memories of the old usually give the past brighter and more attractive colors than they had in reality.»

«I understand, Grandfather. I will go to the White Faces' school. That will be my warrior's path. I will consider that I have been taken captive. If necessary, I am ready to die there, but I will learn everything that may be useful to my people during this captivity. This will be my battle for the life of my tribe. Only…»

«What is it? Don't be shy.»

«Before that, I would like to undergo a sacred trial,» the boy looked intently at the old man. «I heard that before, a warrior would come to a knowledgeable person and ask for his help in this trial, for guidance. Is that so?»

«Are you speaking of the tortures of the Sun Dance?»

«Yes.»

«You want to go through the blood?» Crazy Bear looked stern.

«Let this mark the beginning of my path,» the teenager said decisively, his black eyes flashing. «If I pass through the blood successfully, I will know that I can overcome any difficulties.»

«You are young for the Sun Dance,» Bear thought, «before, a warrior had to have been on the warpath, and only after that…»

«Grandfather, you yourself said that times have changed. Where would I go on the warpath?»

«You are right,» the old man nodded. «You are right…»

He raised his eyes to the sky and saw in the depths of the white clouds a hazy outline of a rider with large bison horns on his head. The horned shadow floated smoothly between the cloud cliffs, as if between snowy

rocks, waved a long spear, and dissolved in the high azure.

«You are right,» Bear repeated, continuing to look upward, «times are changing.»

The next morning in the pre-dawn twilight, he led the boy to the stream where a small, rounded sweat lodge stood, tightly covered with blankets. Standing Warrior and Big Shell, Indians of the same age as Crazy Bear, were already waiting for them there.

«Now we will conduct Inipi and give you a new name,» said Bear, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder.

While the boy sat inside the sweat lodge with Bear, Standing Warrior and Big Shell prayed outside and handed them the heated stones. One of them tapped a drum now and then.

«Today I adopt you,» Crazy Bear said, «and give you the name of my deceased son. From now on, you will be Moonlight.»

The boy saw nothing in the darkness, only heard the hot hiss of the stones being sprinkled with a thin stream of water, and the voice of the old man opposite him. And it also seemed to him sometimes that tiny blue sparks flashed around his head. They flashed, flew a little, and went out.

«With the new name, you receive the strength of its former owner. Now turn to He-Who-Breathes-Life-Into-Us. Thank Him for everything, express your readiness to accept any trials as due...»

When the Purification Ceremony was over, Crazy Bear led the boy outside. The two other old men took the teenager by the arms and led him to the water.

«Wash your body from head to toe,» one of them ordered.

As soon as Moonlight emerged from the stream and stopped before the old men, Bear threw a blanket over him and tightly wrapped it around the boy's head.

«We will lead you to a sacred place where you will remain in complete solitude and pray for several days. Perhaps a vision will visit you, but it may happen that you see nothing. We cannot presume. This is your path now...»

They walked for a long time, climbing the slope of a hill. The tall grass tickled Moonlight's steamed skin, sharp stones dug into his bare feet. When the mentors removed the blanket from the boy's head, he saw himself in a small clearing surrounded by pines. A small pit had been dug in the ground.

«Lie down in this pit, my son,» said Bear. «You will conduct your fast

in it. I leave you my sacred pipe. You do not need to smoke it, just hold it in your hands or near you. If you feel any danger, just take the pipe and turn to the Great Spirit. Remember that Wakan Tanka watches over us and is present within us every moment. Nothing is done without His will. Nothing bad will happen to you if you give yourself entirely into the hands of Wakan Tanka…»

Two days passed for Moonlight almost unnoticed. He only occasionally rose to stretch his legs, taking a few steps, and then lay down again in the pit, wrapped in the blanket. Several times he heard the rustle of leaves nearby and immediately grabbed the pipe, trying to drive away the rising fear of wild animals and instill confidence in himself.

On the third day on the mountain, Moonlight felt his head spin severely. The weather had noticeably deteriorated; a gray drizzle was falling. The earth in the pit gradually turned to mud. The boy stood up and took a deep breath. Wanting to warm his stiff muscles, he bent over and began rubbing his calves with both hands. At that same moment, his head grew heavy, and he fell. As he righted himself, he shook his head slightly and squeezed his eyes shut. His heart was beating rapidly. When he looked ahead, he saw a naked man covered in blood.

The stranger barely touched the ground with his feet, swaying on straps threaded through the skin of his chest and back, the other ends fastened to four vertical poles stuck in the earth. The stranger's legs were tightly bound with a rope.

«Ugh!» Moonlight exhaled and lost consciousness, experiencing a sudden pain in his chest and back.

When he came to, the wrinkled face of Crazy Bear was leaning over him. The drizzle continued to fall, softly tapping on the drooping brim of the hat on the old man's head.

«I will help you go down,» said Crazy Bear, «I think it is time for you to go down.»

«I saw,» the boy whispered.

«Very good. We will discuss it later.»

«I saw,» Moonlight's eyes burned, «I had a vision!»

«That is a great honor, my son. Not everyone receives a vision.»

«I think I saw the torture I must go through. But it's not the usual Sun Dance. I saw a man who wasn't dancing, but simply hanging from straps… Two straps threaded through the chest muscles, two straps through the

shoulders… And someone was rocking him… I saw it…»

«If you are ready to go through with this, then so be it.»

They carefully descended the hillside, holding onto wet tree trunks.

«When can I begin?» the boy asked.

«Today you will rest and tell me everything in great detail. I must know what you heard during the fast, what you saw, what thoughts came to you. All of this is very important, everything has serious meaning, son. And tomorrow I will prepare the place for you to embody your vision in life…»

The old man stopped and leaned tiredly against a pine tree, whose rough bark was covered in resin. His gaze fixed on the settlement, dotted with the cones of tipis, the little squares of wooden structures, and the strips of fences.

«I want to warn you, son, not to tell anyone about your intention to undergo self-torture. No one should know that you intend to pierce your flesh. Do you understand what I am saying? The white bosses want our religion to die, so they imprison anyone preparing for the Sun Dance. I am old already, I have nothing to fear from punishment.»

«I will be silent, Grandfather.»

«Scars will remain on your chest for life. In the distant white school, they will help you feel like a warrior and give you confidence in the most difficult situations.»

«I understand everything, Grandfather.»

«Good. We must go on.»

AKICITA NAZIN

His Story as translated by Winthrop Haley

The Wasichus were very strict in ensuring we did not perform our sacred ceremonies. We were not allowed to hold the Sun Dance, we could not undergo the Purification Ceremony. In this, they struck us down more than with all their victories on the battlefield. They cut our roots.

When Crazy Bear adopted the boy named Wet Hands and called him Moonlight, that is, gave him the name of his deceased son, he called me once more and said the boy intended to undergo flesh torture. I was very surprised, because I knew how severely we could be punished for this ceremony. But Bear explained that the boy had received a vision which showed him what must be done.

We did not take anyone with us. Only Moonlight, Bear, and I were present. Bear had previously set up four poles, between which the boy was to hang. It was a very ancient method of self-torture. I had never once in my life seen any of our people suspend themselves like that. Usually, they danced around a pole.

But such was Moonlight's vision.

Two straps were threaded under the skin of his chest, and two under the skin of his back, near the shoulders. Furthermore, Moonlight ordered his legs to be tied. He hung for exactly two days, and the skin kept stretching and stretching. His torment was terrible. Finally, the skin burst, and he fell face down on the ground. Yes, he had a hard time, but he showed real courage, even though he was very young. He was exhausted but felt happy.

«Now I have become a true Lakota,» he said when his strength returned.

For five days after that, we remained outside the reservation, as we could not allow Moonlight to appear in the village in a mutilated state. His torn wounds spoke for themselves. If anyone had seen him bandaged, they would surely have guessed the reason. And rumors spread with lightning

speed. So we decided to wait it out in the woods.

When we were almost at the reservation, we saw a police patrol that had suddenly appeared and immediately lay down in the grass. As soon as we dropped to the ground, I heard the familiar sound of a snake's rattle and understood, without turning my head, that a rattlesnake was lurking in the thickets to my right. I did not dare take out my knife and kill the snake, as I was afraid of attracting the attention of the policemen, who had stopped their horses a few dozen steps from us. But the snake lay too close to ignore the warning movement of its rattling tail. And so I began carefully gathering sagebrush in my mouth and chewing its fragrant leaves. When a lot of pungent green saliva had gathered in my mouth, I slowly turned my head and spat on the snake. I had to repeat this several times, and a couple of times my saliva hit the snake in the head. Finally, the rattler crawled away without touching any of us. Soon the policemen also left, and we reached our homes safely.

At the beginning of autumn, Moonlight volunteered to go to the white man's school. I saw him again only after several winters.

Soon after Moonlight's departure, Crazy Bear called me and Big Shell and said he had decided to perform the Sun-Gazing Ceremony once more.

«My strength is not what it was. I may not live to see next summer,» he said.

He really did look poorly, and I did not dare refuse him, understanding that Bear never did anything without reason. We smoked a pipe over this, and he told us to take three boys to the ceremony so they could see it with their own eyes.

«We need messengers who will go into the future,» he explained.

Late at night, we left the reservation. Crazy Bear led us to a remote place where human skulls lay in a circle around an old poplar tree. No one knew how long they had been there or why they were laid out like that. I think these were traces of an ancient people about whom we know nothing. Bags made of leather and four bison skulls hung from the upper branches of the poplar. But they were only visible in winter; in summer, foliage hid them. Probably, these sacred objects were hung when the tree was small, and over the years they rose to the sky with the tree.

There Crazy Bear planned to hold the ceremony.

Before, clan communities would gather for the Sun Dance from the farthest corners. Many relatives saw each other only at this festival. The

Lakota loved it because they saw their power when gathering in a large village.

Only six of us came — three old men and three boys. Our time to leave this world had come, and it was for them to carry the knowledge of the sacred rite through the years, to someday pass it on to their children.

For the first time in many years, I saw people in ritual paint next to me again. And for the first time, I understood that I had truly grown old. My hands struggled to pierce the skin on Crazy Bear's chest near the old scars. His skin was dry and tough. After driving the sharpened sticks into the old man's flesh, I first thought the blood would never flow, it took so long to come. Then I tied to these sticks the straps hanging from the top of the pole.

I did this just before sunrise, so that with the first rays, Crazy Bear could begin the ceremony. He was going to dance the whole day, as was customary in the times of our distant ancestors. He was to move his feet slowly, following the sun, as if tying himself to it with his gaze. I couldn't imagine how he could manage what he intended. Simply dancing all day at his age would be beyond many, and he was tormented by incredible pain. I had undergone this trial once and knew perfectly well the torment people experience.

Old men are lightweight, and our strength is not the same, so Crazy Bear did not pull very hard on the straps stretching from his chest to the top of the pole.

The boys watched our actions attentively.

As soon as the sky turned golden, Crazy Bear began to chant.

«Great Mystery, you are within us and around us. You support us when we need help and do not extend your hands to us when we do not deserve it. We have not yet uttered a word, and you already know it. All our thoughts are known to you, Heavenly Father! Oh, Wakan Tanka, see and hear us in these difficult days. You are the Chief-Who-Generates-All-Power, and today we, gathered here, show you our respect and offer in sacrifice human blood, shed not by force, but by free will…»

Big Shell began to beat the drum. He started to sing when Crazy Bear's voice broke. Then I sang too, helping Bear move in a circle. He moved very slowly because he was following the sun, not taking his eyes off it. I think he soon saw nothing but bright spots. It is a very difficult thing — to dance while looking at the sun.

«Our Father, our people are guilty, for they have forgotten Your Path and strayed. But today we have brought children so they may look more intently at the Luminary and be convinced that Your will moves the Heavenly Fire that warms all living things on Mother Earth. They will gain strength by speaking with You this day, and confidence that Your Path cannot be changed, no matter how much man strives for it. I follow the Sun and cannot retreat a single step, I am tied to it and to the center of the universe. I turn to you, Great Mystery. Protect our offspring, for from now on it is for them to carry out Your will. I ask for all our children, protect them from mistakes. You are the Only Power to which we are all turned, by You this world is arranged and laws are given to us. We have broken them, like foolish infants, raising our hand against Your other creations. Do we have the right to hope for a better lot when we have not deserved it? We will pay until we turn our hearts to you and return to Your Path…»

He did not allow himself to be detached from the straps until sunset, though he could barely stand. He was trembling all over. I supported him from behind, the boys did too. But as soon as the sun disappeared, he exclaimed:

«Enough!»

And fell, without waiting for me to cut the straps. Usually, one of the helpers would jump on the dancer's shoulders if he lacked the strength to break the straps himself. But I allowed my exhausted friend to lie on the ground without being freed from the straps. He was completely covered in dried blood, and the inflamed chest muscles were very swollen, so I could not immediately extract the sticks to which the straps were attached. I slit the flesh with a knife and pulled out the sticks. Then I did everything as was customary in such cases. I wrapped the pieces of skin from Crazy Bear's chest in scraps of bison hide to leave them, along with the bloodied sticks, in a sacrificial bundle. Big Shell and I sang the concluding song.

But Crazy Bear heard none of this. After the ceremony, he lay unconscious all night. Neither I, nor Big Shell, nor the boys thought he would return to life. His body grew cold, and his heart was barely audible. But in the morning, he opened his eyes and with difficulty rose to his feet.

«We must go to the people,» he said.

Before leaving this place, he ordered one of the boys to fetch an ancient shield wrapped in cloth. I remember the time when Crazy Bear

went on war raids with that shield. Now we have no real shields left. Sometimes young men make round frames, stretch deer hide over them, paint them with sacred symbols, and use these imitations during dance performances, but these are not actually shields. The making of shields was always done by special people who understood protective power. It was such a real shield, with the image of a black bear, that the boy tied to the pole on which we left hanging the cut pieces of the dancer's chest meat.

We could not offer the Great Mystery anything more, as we were poor. But Crazy Bear said that this was as it should be — people cannot own anything.

We placed Crazy Bear on a travois and bandaged his chest.

Returning to the reservation, we surprised those who noticed us, because we had not washed off our paint, and people understood where we were returning from — the time for summer ceremonies was most appropriate. To some, our behavior might have seemed unreasonable, as the Sun Dance was strictly forbidden. But our three boys rode on their skinny horses very proudly, and we old men felt we had done the right thing.

But we did not meet as many people as one might have wished. At that time, the madness the white people called the Ghost Dance had already begun in our reservations, so few Lakota lived in the settlement. Most had left for the camps where the Lakota patiently danced in circles, visible from a great distance by the countless clouds of dust. Having abandoned all tasks, they stomped their feet, moving in a circle. They danced day and night, falling from exhaustion.

The thing was, rumors had reached us of a great prophet from the land of the Snakes. He promised that the old times would soon return, the bison would appear, the dead ancestors would be resurrected, and the hated Wasichu would perish! What Lakota would not want such a miracle? And the prophet said that nothing needed to be done for this. One only needed to dance and perform sacred songs. He assured that soon a wave of fresh earth would roll in and sweep away all the White Faces…

Fourteen winters had already passed since the last battles. Our youth listened to our stories about the past, holding their breath. The young men burned with desire to become heroes like their fathers and grandfathers. They languished from inaction, and the only thing that made their young hearts beat was the tales of the exploits of bygone years. And the prophecy

of a distant messiah promised them the return of the past.

I remember how Crazy Bear tried to dissuade people from participating in the Dance. He said:

«Do you think Wakan Tanka intends to return to you the life your fathers had? Young men, you dream of war and glory won in battle. But you do not understand that the Heavenly Father took such a life away from you precisely because it was not righteous. For the Great Spirit, we are all his children, even the White Faces. Why would the Creator want to destroy a huge tribe of white people if He Himself created them and endowed them with the power that destroyed our way of life? We all came from the One Womb, and we will all return there, so there is no one among us who is more important or better. I have not met a single Lakota who would dispute this. But this is remembered only during sacred ceremonies, when every word and movement is filled with sacred meaning. However, as soon as the ceremony ends, people return to their habitual state and are again ready to rush into battle, to affirm themselves by the death of an enemy. But Wakan Tanka watches us continuously, so our every step must be filled with prayer...»

I look back and understand that Crazy Bear was right. And it is hard for me to agree that my entire long life and the life of my people is full of mistakes. I was not the only one who thought so. Everyone felt bitter and resentful, and few were ready to accept a new perspective.

I know many mature men who decided that the prophecy about the return of the past life was merely a pretext for starting a war. And they took up arms. The youth were especially fervent. Every day, someone saw armed riders galloping towards the Bad Lands. Their horses' tails were tied in knots. This meant the Lakota had taken the warpath.

Crazy Bear only shook his head. He said the Ghost Dance was leading to new blood. I thought so too. Almost all the old men thought so. We knew that the able-bodied Lakota were too few to match strength with the soldiers. But times had changed, and no one listened to the voices of the gray-haired people.

FADING BEYOND THE HORIZON

The air grew colder with each passing day. The trees stood bare, giving the surroundings an irredeemably dreary appearance. The withered grass drooped, dusted with snow. Along the bank of the creek that skirted the agency, a long line of skewed wagons, for which the Lakota had no use and were breaking up for firewood, stood in a row. A dozen or so wooden shacks, where government officials tried to settle the «savages,» stood silent by the road.

In the last days of December, soldiers on powerful gray horses galloped through the Pine Ridge agency, their weapons clattering. Soldiers meant bullets and death. The appearance of cavalrymen had never led to any other consequences. For many days, the situation in the reservation had been tense to the limit.

Hearing the stomping and snorting of horses, Crazy Bear emerged from his tipi, coughing. The Indian village had moved out several days ago, and now the old man saw in the rising white wind how the housewives of the only two tipis still standing nearby were hurriedly taking down their dwellings and loading their belongings onto travois. In many places, the poles remained standing, stacked in cones and plastered with snow. The women hurried and fretted. A couple of disheveled dogs circled around them. Two dejected old men were trying to harness a scrawny mare to a bulky two-wheeled cart.

Through the air, like lazy rolls of thunder, swayed long-forgotten, alarming echoes of barely discernible artillery volleys. The cavalrymen quickly disappeared, heading north. Somewhere there, on the bank of the creek called Wounded Knee, the band of Big Foot was camped; he had not long ago led his people away from the agency into the Bad Lands, frightened by the concentration of soldiers on the reservation territory. Yesterday, Crazy Bear learned that Big Foot had decided to return but had encountered cavalry near Wounded Knee and made a stop to talk with the white people…

Crazy Bear lifted his face to the low, churning sky and opened his eyes

wide. He stood like that for several minutes, ignoring the burning snow needles piercing his neck.

«O, Wakan Tanka…» his lips whispered. «There is none more powerful than you… Tell me what is happening…»

He saw riders in greatcoats emerge from the clouds, cannons roll out, and disheveled figures of Indians run. They appeared and then vanished in the shaggy surface of the clouds. Yellow streaks of gunfire flashed, red drops scattered like beads. The wind gusted and licked away the scenes of battle, clearing the sky for the next act. Crazy Bear heard no sound around him except the whistle of the blizzard, but in his heart, human screams rang out deafeningly. Burning tears overwhelmed the old man, and he understood that these were the tears of those who were perishing at that very moment in the icy blizzard from soldiers' bullets, having lost all hope for the future. It was the soul of the tribe that was weeping.

As soon as the vision of the massacre disappeared, the old man returned to his tipi and soon emerged from it, clad in an ancient war shirt he had not worn for decades. He untied a short, bay horse, its head drooping to the ground, and heavily mounted it.

«Today, my Father, many of my brothers will turn to you… Forgive them for thinking that the rifles in their hands were stronger than Your will…»

A gust of wind caught his long gray hair and plunged it into the swirling snowflakes.

Gently urging on the dejected bay, Crazy Bear rode up the road towards the Pine Ridge agency. To his left, the bend of White Clay Creek was visible, along which the skeletons of Indian dwellings could be seen on the site of Red Shirt's camp. Crossing through snowdrifts, the rider reached the straight road that cut right through the agency.

Reaching the Episcopal church, Crazy Bear spread his arms wide and straightened up. The long fringe on his sleeves flapped in the wind, rustling loudly. Somewhere, an unlocked door was banging, echoed by a frightened dog. From the trading post behind the church, two figures in fur coats ran out and scurried across the road towards the police station.

Crazy Bear rode slowly along the street and in a strong voice, as if belonging to a young man, proclaimed:

«Listen to me, people! Go to your homes! Bullets may fly here now! Do not fight! Restrain your anger! He who gave you life is watching you! Be reasonable, do not cause bloodshed!»

He shouted, turning in all directions and constantly switching from his native tongue to English. His shaggy horse sometimes stopped, circling in place, and then continued its slow pace.

On the summit of the nearest hill at the northern end of the settlement, riders were clearly visible. The heads of many were adorned with feathers. For a long time, the «savages» pranced on the spot, and the terrified residents of the agency felt horror gripping their hearts more and more tightly. Several times, the sound of gunshots was heard, but the detachment did not move from the flat hill, as if waiting. Soon the snowfall hid the Indians, and the waiting became even more agonizing.

Murky shadows darted beneath the clouds, sometimes resembling birds, sometimes becoming like people, sometimes vanishing altogether. Sometimes they fell right to the ground and skimmed over its surface, whipping up white whirlwinds. But the fear-stricken people did not discern them. Only the lone rider, covered in snow, saw their dance around him. He felt how they supported his outstretched, tired old arms. He heard how they strengthened his feeble voice, granting it youthful firmness and clarity.

«People! People! Do not shoot! Wakan Tanka is gazing upon you…»

July 1995 — February 1996,
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